

weekly \$7.95

February 3, 2016

# THE Christian CENTURY

*Thinking Critically, Living Faithfully*



## LIES

The Christian century

**PROCESSED**

FEB 02 2016

**GTU LIBRARY**

# The summer that changed my life

I had too many questions about God and the Bible. But then I met other teens who shared my questions...my passions.

## **We had some amazing days that summer.**

We climbed mountains—figurative and literal. We hung out with seminary professors. We explored different ways of doing ministry. It helped prepare me for college... for life.

**Today, I serve God as a medical missionary.** A pivotal turning point was that youth and theology summer program. It put my whole life in a new light.

---

34 low-cost programs across the country. Choose the one that fits your high schooler best (geographically and theologically). Go to:

**[www.youththeology.org](http://www.youththeology.org)**

Made possible through support from Lilly Endowment Inc.



LYTN

LILLY YOUTH  
THEOLOGY NETWORK

*Publisher*  
Peter W. Marty

*Executive Editor*  
David Heim

*Senior Editor*  
Debra Bendis

*Associate Editors*  
Amy Frykholm  
Steve Thorngate

*News Editor*  
Celeste Kennel-Shank

*Books Editor*  
Elizabeth Palmer

*Poetry Editor*  
Jill Peláez Baumgaertner

*Editorial Assistant*  
Janet Potter

*Advertising Manager*  
Heidi Baumgaertner

*Art Director*  
Daniel Richardson

*Production Assistant*  
Diane Mills

*Director of Finance*  
Maureen C. Gavin

*Donor Relations*  
Janet M. Milkovich

*Marketing Consultant*  
Shanley & Associates

*Contributing Editors*  
John M. Buchanan  
Richard A. Kauffman  
Dean Peerman  
Trudy Bush  
Jason Byassee  
Martin E. Marty  
James M. Wall

*Editors at Large*  
M. Craig Barnes  
Ellen Charry  
Lillian Daniel  
Beverly R. Gaventa  
Belden C. Lane  
Thomas G. Long  
Thomas Lynch  
Kathleen Norris  
Lamin Sanneh  
Max L. Stackhouse  
Miroslav Volf  
William H. Willimon  
Carol Zaleski

Walter Brueggemann  
Martin B. Copenhaver  
William F. Fore  
L. Gregory Jones  
Leo Lefebure  
Robin W. Lovin  
Bill McKibben  
Stephanie Paulsell  
Donald Shriver  
Barbara Brown Taylor  
Grant Wacker  
Ralph C. Wood

February 3, 2016 Vol. 133, No. 3

# IN THIS Issue

- 6 Letters**  
Vancouver's soil
- 7 Loaded with debt**  
The Editors: Making college affordable
- 8 CenturyMarks**  
Wholehearted living, provisional reading, etc.
- 10 Still life with winter squash**  
Terra Brockman: Notes from the farm
- 12 Burying William**  
Rebecca Messman: Funeral for a gang victim
- 24 Lies**  
Essays by readers
- 30 God's dice**  
James Bradley: Randomness can have purpose

Cover illustration © Jupiter Images

## NEWS

- 14** Against the odds, some small churches thrive;  
InterVarsity leaders back Black Lives Matter efforts during student conference;  
Islamic revival movement quietly sweeps Middle East;  
Women don't often turn to churches or pastors for advice on abortion

## IN REVIEW

### 34 Books

**Richard Lischer:** *How Dante Can Save Your Life*, by Rod Dreher; *Curiosity*, by Alberto Manguel  
**Randall Balmer:** *One Nation Under God*, by Kevin M. Kruse  
**Walter Brueggemann:** *Zionism and Judaism*, by David Novak  
**James L. Guth:** *Godless Democrats and Pious Republicans?* by Ryan L. Claassen

### 44 Media

**Kathryn Reklis:** Out of sync

### 47 Art

**Heidi J. Hornik and Mikeal C. Parsons:** *Baptism of Christ and Temptations*, by Michele Tosini (1503–1577)

## COLUMNS

### 20–23 Living by the Word

**Malinda Elizabeth Berry**

### 33 Faith Matters

**M. Craig Barnes:** The post-anxiety church

### 45 Church in the Making

**Carol Howard Merritt:** Harvest in due time

## POETRY

**11 Brian Doyle:** A bride with brass

**13 Muriel Nelson:** Hey, Adam

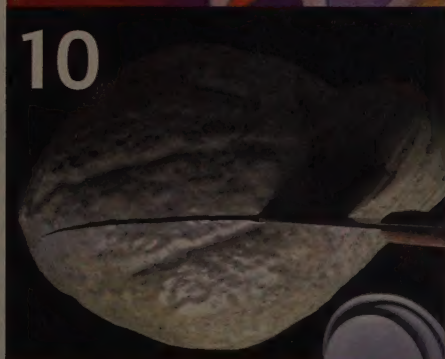
**32 Angela Alaimo O'Donnell:** The still pilgrim invents dawn

**SUBSCRIPTIONS & CUSTOMER SERVICE:** Tel.: 800-208-4097. E-mail: christiancentury@cambeywest.com. The CHRISTIAN CENTURY, P.O. Box 429, Congers, NY 10920-0429. Fax: 845-267-3478. Subscriptions \$65 per year; \$105 Canadian; \$125 other foreign. Online-only subscriptions available at christiancentury.org: \$2.95 for four weeks; \$24.95 for six months; \$39.95 for 12 months.

**EDITORIAL OFFICE:** General queries to main@christiancentury.org; 312-263-7510. Letters to the editor: letters@christiancentury.org or the CHRISTIAN CENTURY, Attn: Letters to the Editor, 104 S. Michigan Ave., Suite 1100, Chicago, IL 60603. For information on rights & permissions, submissions guidelines, advertising information, letters to the editor: christiancentury.org/contact.

Established 1884. Renamed the CHRISTIAN CENTURY 1900. Copyright © 2016 by the CHRISTIAN CENTURY. All rights reserved under the International Copyright Union, Universal Copyright Convention, and Pan-American Copyright Convention.

The CHRISTIAN CENTURY (ISSN 0009-5281) is published biweekly at 104 S. Michigan Ave., Suite 1100, Chicago IL 60603. Periodicals postage paid at Chicago, IL, and additional mailing offices. Canada Post Publications Mail Product (Canadian Distribution) Sales Agreement No. 1406523. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to CHRISTIAN CENTURY, P.O. Box 429, Congers, NY 10920-0429.



# CAN'T IMAGINE THE WORLD WITHOUT THE CENTURY?

Help us guarantee that the CENTURY will reach future generations of thoughtful Christians: make a bequest to the CENTURY in your will.

Please send me information regarding the following:

\_\_\_\_\_ Bequest language for including the CENTURY in my will and estate plans

\_\_\_\_\_ How to become a CENTURY ASSOCIATE

\_\_\_\_\_ How to give a one-time gift to the CENTURY

Name:

Address:

City/State/Zip:

Phone:

E-mail:

Send to:

The Christian Century  
104 S. Michigan Ave.  
Suite 1100  
Chicago, IL 60603

Or call (312) 263-7510 ext. 229

# LETTERS

## Vancouver's soil

Growing up in the Vancouver area as a part of the tiny evangelical minority proved to be invaluable preparation for ministry in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). In Pittsburgh, a historic hub of American Presbyterianism (we have one congregation for every five square miles in the Pittsburgh Presbytery), the crumbling of Christendom can cause much anxiety. The experience of growing up in a post-Christendom world helps me maintain hope for the viability and vitality of a witness to the gospel that needs no Christendom props. Jason Byassee's profile of some of these developments ("Vancouver's stony soil," Jan. 6) is heartening. It would be helpful also to profile some other nonecclesiocentric ways the gospel is being engaged in that area.

Sheldon Sorge  
Pittsburgh, Pa.

My family and I moved to Vancouver in 2000, and for a number of reasons we found ourselves at Tenth Church. We have had the great joy of watching God work with Ken Shigematsu to raise up a vibrant outpost of the kingdom of the very creative Redeemer. I have also had the joy of watching other congregations sprout out of the rocky soil—Coastal, Westside, Village, and more. Thanks for telling God's story so well.

Darrell Johnson  
Vancouver, B.C.

### In the realm of the nones . . .

Thanks for Teri McDowell Ott's insightful "In the realm of the nones" (Jan. 6). In my 37 years in medical practice and five years in hospital chaplaincy I have listened to many nones tell their stories. Yes, some have been hurt by

church folks, even well-meaning ones. A few are even quite angry at organized religion. But they also speak of great inward or spiritual journeys. They speak without reference to "God" or "Jesus," but nonetheless as I listen I hear God, I hear Jesus, and I find myself thanking God for the one who has written "none" under "religious preference." We are more alike than different.

Bill Holmes  
christiancentury.org comment

It is refreshing to hear another chaplain walking the edge between the nones and the nons: between the nonspiritual and the nonsecular. Because it's really never about being a "none"—an outsider—but about being human together. May we all listen more and "save" less.

Chris Highland  
christiancentury.org comment

### Trump . . .

The various efforts to compartmentalize Americans by religious, ethnic, and other categories provide ample ground for those who resort to demagoguery and twisted justification for violence. Your editorial "Trump call" (Jan. 6) provides added emphasis for us to speak out when others are being subjected to bigotry and hatred.

Stephen D. Harris  
Gettysburg, Pa.

As a generally center-right conservative I am dismayed at the following Trump has gained, especially among those who are educated and knowledgeable. I find I am more likely to vote for a liberal Democrat if Trump is the nominee. They at least would do slightly less harm.

David Owen  
christiancentury.org comment

February 3, 2016

## Loaded with debt

As the cost of a university education has skyrocketed, the nation's 50-year bipartisan commitment to making college affordable has faltered. That commitment was based on the belief that "no qualified student who wants to go to college should be barred for lack of money," to quote President Richard M. Nixon, and it has been acted on in government grants, work-study programs, and low-interest loans for financially needy students. But over the past three decades, this network of programs has been drastically outpaced by the steep rise in the cost of attending public and private universities.

The price of in-state tuition at public universities has tripled in this period, largely because of sharp cuts in funding by state legislatures. It is no longer possible to finance a college education simply through a combination of work-study programs and summer employment. The gap in funding has been borne by families and students, largely by having students take out more and larger loans. Nearly 70 percent of college students now graduate in debt, with the average debt close to \$30,000.

Studies have shown that student debt under \$10,000 is manageable. Above that amount, the debt load hampers individuals from starting families, buying homes, starting businesses, and saving for retirement.

The debt burden affects all students, but especially those whose families have the least wealth to begin with. Low-income students end up with the most debt, and they and their families, have the fewest resources for managing it. The consequences of defaulting on the debt, which undermines a person's credit, are more drastic for low-income students.

Minority and low-income students are also most likely to struggle to finish their degrees and more likely to drop out of school in order to support their families, either by taking a job or by assuming a caregiving role. They often end up heavily in debt and without a degree to show for it. And, of course, the prospect of debt may discourage low-income students from pursuing college at all.

One arena of reform is to press universities to raise graduation rates for low-income students. If the schools are going to rely on the proceeds of loans that students take out, they should be required to give students the academic support they need to succeed. The focus of reform, however, must be on making college truly affordable by lowering tuition at public universities—and that means a greater investment by states and the federal government.

Colleges by themselves cannot erase social inequalities or solve disparities in educational preparation, but they remain crucial to economic success. Having graduated from college remains a key predictor of social mobility. Making college affordable is a public good, a necessary component of democracy.

**Making college affordable is a public good.**

# CENTURY marks

**CHICKADEE PEOPLE:** Plenty Coups was the chief of the Crow Nation who helped his people survive the disappearance of the buffalo and the move onto the reservation. In a vision he heard a voice say that “he must be like the chickadee—listening, attentive, industrious, trusting, with a well-developed mind and body, tending to the work at hand.” He decided he must lead his people to be “chickadee-people.” They became successful farmers and ranchers and adopted an indigenized Christianity (*Toronto Journal of Theology*, Supplement 1, 2015).

**THE WHOLEHEARTED:** Brené Brown, research professor at the University of Houston, says that some people can

experience failure without damage to their self-esteem. She calls these “wholehearted” people, a word she picked up from the Episcopal liturgy (“We have not loved You with our whole hearts”). In examining her data, she noticed that courage and vulnerability tend to go hand in hand. “Our capacity for wholeheartedness can never be greater than our willingness to be brokenhearted,” she concluded (*Weavings*, vol. 31, no. 1).

**LIBERATING EXEGESIS:** Rachel Mikva, who teaches Jewish studies at Chicago Theological Seminary, says that she introduces her students to the rabbinical tradition of interpreting scripture so they learn that there is not necessarily only one right interpreta-

tion of texts. Jewish exegesis is dynamic, multivocal, provisional, and can even be contradictory. Jewish interpretation liberates the students to a sacred discontent that allows not only protest against the status quo but against God as well (*Theological Education*, vol. 50, no. 1).

**LIKE-MINDED?** The novelist Pico Iyer and others have seen parallels between monk and author Thomas Merton and songwriter Leonard Cohen. Both started practicing Zen while remaining firmly in their own religious traditions (Merton was a Catholic, Cohen is Jewish). Both spent time in monasteries, but they were monastic in their own particular ways. Both struggled with unresolved sexual issues and attempted to integrate the sacred and the spiritual. Both have been a source of inspiration and provocation to thousands. The two never met, but after spending five years at a Zen monastery in California, Cohen accompanied his abbot on a visit to the Abby of Our Lady of Gethsemani where Merton had been a monk and hermit (*Presence*, December).

## HOMILY ON FOOTBALL:

*Concussion*, the movie about football players being repeatedly concussed, is not so much a sports movie or a medical thriller as it is a Christian homily, says Ian Crouch. The story is about Dr. Bennet Omalu, a Nigerian-born pathologist who discovered chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), the buildup of protein deposits in the brain caused by repeated blows to the head, such as occur in football. In an early scene in the movie, Omalu (played by Will Smith) says to his col-



leagues, "God did not intend for us to play football." A doctor tells him to leave God out of his research. In real life, Omalu is a devout Catholic (*New Yorker*, December 31).

**ALTERNATIVE DISCIPLINE:**

Restorative justice programs are gaining popularity in public schools because they contribute to dramatic declines in disciplinary problems, improve the social environment, and increase academic performance. Typical is the program in Pittsfield, New Hampshire, where low-level offenses are handled by a student-run justice committee, supported by administrators and teachers. The goal of these programs is to address underlying issues, encourage offenders and victims to talk through the issues, and see that offenders make amends to victims and the larger community (*Atlantic*, December 29).

**CHOIR ABUSE:** Allegations that more than 200 boys in a Catholic-run choir and two connected schools in Germany were abused over the span of several decades, some of them sexually, have brought the church's abuse scandal uncomfortably close to Benedict XVI. The former pope's older brother, Monsignor Georg Ratzinger, directed the Bavarian choir during that time. A lawyer hired by the Diocese of Regensburg last year to look into the allegations of abuse between 1953 and 1992 said that at least 50 of the 231 alleged victims made "plausible" claims of sexual abuse. When reports of sexual abuse in the 1,000-year-old choir first surfaced publicly in 2010, Georg Ratzinger insisted that he was unaware of them. The cases are too old to be prosecuted (RNS).

**HOVERING IN THE AISLES:**

Father Albert San José, a priest in the Philippines, ran afoul of diocesan authorities when he rode up and down the aisles on a hoverboard, singing a Christmas song during a Christmas Eve mass. He said he wanted to give people a treat. Diocesan authorities weren't amused; they suspended the priest. A hoverboard is a two-wheeled electric scooter (it doesn't actually

**“We do have two different tax systems, one for normal wage-earners and another for those who can afford sophisticated tax advice. At the very top of the income distribution, the effective rate of tax goes down, contrary to the principles of a progressive income tax system.”**

— Victor Fleischer, a law professor at the University of San Diego, who studies the intersection of tax policy and inequality (*New York Times*, December 29).

**“We would like to live our lives in peace, but we haven't seen peace since we've been born.”**

— Sister Ban Saaed, an Iraqi Catholic nun living in a refugee camp under Kurdish control, who works with children who have witnessed horrific violence (CNN, December 30)

hover), which was a popular Christmas gift (*Crux*, December 29).

**FORMERLY OWNED:** As sales of digital books slow, used bookstores are making a comeback. In some communities used bookstores are the only ones that have survived competition with Amazon. Used bookstores are able to beat Amazon and other online book-sellers on price, while giving customers the pleasure of browsing through books.

Some new bookstores have added used books departments (*Washington Post*, December 26).

**TRANSITIONS:** With this issue, Elizabeth Palmer takes over as books editor, succeeding Richard A. Kauffman, who retired as senior editor after 14 years with the CENTURY. Richard, who was the book review editor for 12 years, will continue to contribute to CenturyMarks and other departments.

**RELIGIOUS FREEDOM** SOURCE: AP-NORC

While 82 percent of all Americans think the religious freedom of Christians should be protected, that number drops to 61 percent for Muslims. Independents value religious freedom less than other political groups. Shown is the percent who say it is extremely or very important that those in each religious group be allowed to practice their religion freely.

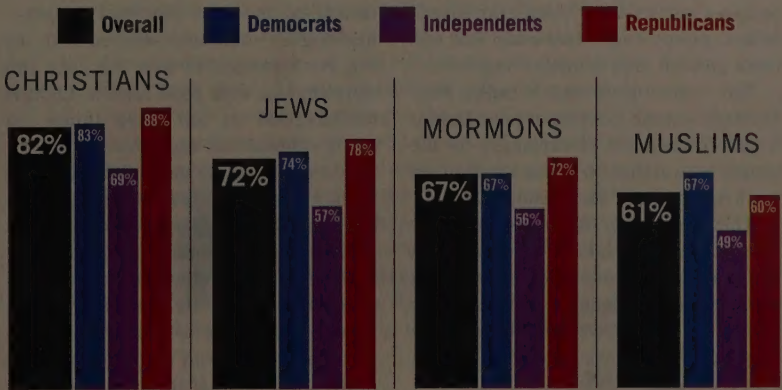




Photo by Terra Brockman

## Notes from the farm

# Still life with winter squash

by *Terra Brockman*

**IT LANDED** on my limestone patio—a warty, weighty, blue-gray, round-bellied, pointy-ended battleship that was more mineral than animal or vegetable.

But vegetable it was: a bulky Blue Hubbard squash from an organic farmer friend. It was a gift, he explained, for the simple reason that no one at the farmers market would buy such a monster.

This was in early November, and it lay where it landed, as each day brought a later sunrise and an earlier sunset. With fewer hours of daylight, we used each minute to the full, working in the fields to get the last greens harvested, the last root crops dug.

After Thanksgiving the weather often resembled my Blue Hubbard squash—heavy, gray, sometimes draped with icy fog. Both seemed to miss the light and warmth, and with good reason. Light is fundamental to all living things on earth—animal and vegetable.

On the farm the changes brought on by day length are seen most clearly in our hens, whose egg production declines precipitously in tandem with the sunlight. Although chickens have been domesticated for thousands of years, they still harbor genes from their ancestors, who like all wild birds lay eggs only in the spring so that they can raise their

young in the warmth of summer. Although our hens lay an egg a day during the summer, we're lucky to get an egg every four or five days in the winter.

Many plants also have day-length triggers, mostly determining when they grow vegetatively and when they flower and set fruit. Through photosynthesis, water in the soil and carbon dioxide in the air combine to form carbohydrate molecules that make up the plant's leaves, stems, roots, and fruits. Long hours of sunshine put chloroplasts into overdrive, and plants grow fast and furious.

As the days shorten, there is less solar energy; vegetative growth slows, and

plants put their energy into flowers and maturing fruits—tomatoes, peppers, eggplants, and more. Some vegetables, such as a head of cauliflower (a mass of tightly packed flower buds), form only when the days get shorter. With only a few hours of daylight, some plants—basil, for example—stop growing entirely, even if they are inside a tropical greenhouse.

## It's not the hours of daylight but the length of the dark periods that controls how plants grow.

Although the term *day length* is used to talk about these effects on plants, it's a misnomer. Researchers have found that it's not the hours of daylight but the length of the dark periods that controls plant growth. If you interrupt a long dark period with even short bursts of light, most plants will grow as they would during the long days and short nights of summer. Understanding the importance of dark periods is important—and not just for gardeners and farmers.

Long nights provide time to rest and restore. Many animals conserve their energy by sleeping away the long nights in their warm burrows. The field that produced all our vegetables the past two years is now entering a fallow period when it will rest and regenerate for two years. My brother is just back from his own fallow year, a sabbatical in Japan. The sun itself appears to pause and take a break (*sol + stice*, “sun standing still”) before the days lengthen again. And I am using this dark velvet time to hunker down, to read, sleep, think, and walk.

When I go down to the fields to pick the remains of the kale and parsley—frost-damaged but also frost-sweetened—I am struck by the stillness, the absence of activity. I pass the brittle remains of tomato vines and pepper bushes, the mounds of earth that yielded potatoes, carrots, beets, and turnips. But as I too become

quiet and still, the absence reveals powerful presences.

A flock of geese pass high overhead in an uneven wavering V. Underfoot the black earth is spongy with unseen life that exudes sweetness with every step. Clouds cover the sun, but just before it sinks below the horizon, it casts a brilliant slant of light across the cover crops.

They have almost stopped growing but are still alive, their roots holding the soil in place against winter winds, rain, snow, and come what may.

When I return home I nearly trip over the Blue Hubbard, still squatting on the stairs. Large as it is, it had almost disap-

peared in the solstice gloaming, becoming part of the monochromatic scenery of winter.

I bring it into the house, cradling it in my arms like a sleeping baby. I place it on the bathroom scale where it registers a magisterial 16 pounds. Then I set it on the table and sit down in front of it. The quieter I become, the more I can hear and the farther I see.

It was at around this time last year, probably during a long night near the solstice, that my farmer friend ordered Blue Hubbard squash seeds, along with hundreds of other varieties of vegetables for his farm. After the seeds arrived, they waited on a shelf until the soil was not too wet and not too dry, not too cold and not too warm. When the time was right, the farmer slipped the papery seeds into the soil. With rain, the seed coats softened; roots emerged and pushed downward.

Then the stem arched upward, breaking into daylight. The cotyledons

---

## A bride with brass

Today's remarkable vision: a woman in her bridal dress Walking purposefully along the street. This was enough Of an amazing sight by itself, but the determined stride, The intent look, her *I am going someplace, and I am not Worrying about how I look, even though I know you are All looking* attitude—that got me. I mean, of course you Wonder where she was going, and where she came from, And why she is alone, and if this is a just little aberrance In an otherwise tightly plotted day, or if she was hustling To catch the bus, and where is the entourage you usually See flanking a bride, the cheerful best friends, the joyous But slightly jealous sisters although they would never say Such a thing even to each other after a few bottles of beer At the reception, or even perhaps the groom, where is he? I was caught in traffic and sped right along and only later Did I think should I have stopped, and offered her a ride? I mean, what if she was hustling to the actual ceremony? What if her Ford broke down and the groom was forlorn? But I have a lovely bride of my own, and I am on the one Bride per groom plan, which I renew every morning with A deep and amazed glee, so I hope the bride on the street Made it to wherever it was she was headed, or whomever. The whomever is a lucky soul, seems to me—a bride who Has the panache to stroll along unconcernedly even as she Knows full well folks are gaping; that's a bride with brass.

Brian Doyle

---

Terra Brockman farms with her brother and family in the Mackinaw River Valley of central Illinois.


unfolded and their chloroplast factories began turning solar energy into carbohydrates. The plant grew rapidly until the vines were some 20 feet long.

Near the summer solstice, big yellow squash flowers blossomed and were pollinated by native flies or honeybees. Then the flower collapsed in on itself, and a small, green, soft-skinned fruit began to form. The plant continued to gather solar energy, but now it went to form the sweet flesh of the rapidly growing squashes—two to five per plant.

One hundred sunrises and one hundred sunsets later, the squashes were ten to 20 pounds each, and their tender green skin had turned blue-gray and formed a hard shell. Beneath the protective armor was a two- to three-inch layer of bright orange flesh. And hiding within the hollow center cavity were plenty of seeds for next year's squash.

The farmer had waited for cold weather to sweeten the squash before harvesting them. And the time my squash had spent outside my house had

further sweetened it, starches converting to sugars as a natural antifreeze. But now, with the solstice and the holidays approaching, it was time to cook the blue beast, perfect in its imperfections, lumpy yet smooth, elegant as celadon ceramics.

I got out my largest, heaviest knife and largest cutting board. I balanced the Blue Hubbard on the board, and we stood still for a long moment—the sun, the squash, the knife, and I—all balanced on the cusp of change. 

## Funeral for a gang victim

# Burying William

by Rebecca Messman

**I DIDN'T START** my day thinking about gang killings. I had been drinking coffee, checking e-mail, juggling schedules, and preparing for Holy Week services. Then Antonio and José showed up. I didn't know Antonio—he was one of many “assistance seekers” who drop by the church office—but I recognized José from Lunch for the Soul, our weekly outreach lunch to the day laborer population of Herndon, Virginia. For nine years we've served large crowds on frigid January days and an intimate bunch of 20 or so when landscaping jobs are easy to come by.

Antonio was fidgety, checking his phone. I found out why. He showed me a crumpled picture of his nephew William, who'd been killed by a gang the week before, his body dumped in a nearby creek bed in Hiddenbrook, a neighborhood where the bridge-playing ladies of

our church drink tea and the only known villain is an unpredictable homeowners association.

Antonio asked that we have a funeral for William at the church on Palm Sunday, the day we celebrate Jesus being called by name before adoring crowds while his enemies bide their time.

I stared into the eyes of William, a 20-year-old boy who had apparently been witness to a gang killing in El Salvador the year before. In order to save his life, Antonio had paid a coyote to have William smuggled into the States. “But I couldn't keep him safe. They found him here,” he said, weeping. Antonio had placed cardboard boxes around town with William's picture attached, hoping to raise the \$9,500 it would cost to ship his body home to El Salvador. This was three times more than it cost to get him

here. The difference in these transactions made my heart scream.

Then Antonio told me that he was neither sleeping nor eating because the gang was threatening him as well. I had rarely been afraid as a pastor in the leafy suburb of Herndon. Sure, there were the standard butterflies before delivering an edgy sermon or the day when a mentally ill or intoxicated person had acted out in the building. But nothing like this.

After Antonio left, I phoned the moderator of the deacons, who happened to be a Fairfax County police officer. I told her about William and the plans for his funeral. We touched bases about reception food and setup, but then I stopped her and asked in an embarrassed whisper, “Maybe I watch too much TV, but do you think this is a good idea?” And she responded, “Of course it is. We're their

church. And in the face of the worst evil the world has to offer, we get to say, "Love wins." \*

The funeral day arrived. The deacons put out a beautiful spread, with egg salad and chocolate chip cookies. Then the Salvadoran community arrived, and the women tucked their *pupusas* next to the lemon bars donated by families in the Hiddenbrook neigh-

In John's Gospel, Mary Magdalene searched for the body of Jesus in a cemetery while it was still dark—which is as crazy as it is courageous. And when she finally encountered the risen Christ, he looked to her like a landscaper, a day laborer, until the moment when he said her name out loud: "Mary." Her heart racing, she made the first Easter profession: "My Lord!"

Lunch for the Soul instead of backing away. It needed that moment when huddled volunteers decided not to cancel Lunch for the Soul when it fell on Christmas Eve, but to use that banner day to draw in more people from the community. It needed lots of moments when someone decided to stay in the conversation, inquiring about another person's life, sharing his or her own struggles, learning names and how to love the other person, instead of jumping up from the table to help clean up or duck out.

Those moments became building blocks of trust in God, an Emmaus Road to our own recognition of Christ. Little by little those moments worked their way into us, into our flesh and bone. Almost without noticing, we wound up with stronger backbones and softer hearts.

The Monday after Easter, Antonio called me up. This time his tears and mine were tears of gratitude for the Holy Week that God had led us through. CC

## We had a chance not just to talk about Holy Week but to live it out.

borhood. Everyone helped arrange chairs and put flowers in vases. It was liturgy, the work of the people.

The sanctuary filled with people, their waves of raw grief crashing over a modest coffin that held William. I would say grown men wept, but they were babies, barely 20 years old themselves. Their anger was hot.

I am not usually one for open caskets, but there was no interest in closure in the room—not yet. The casket stayed open during the entire service, parked on a red carpet flecked with bits of palm branches from the Palm Sunday service earlier that day. There we all were, a Palm Sunday crowd with Good Friday grief, talking about Easter hope.

Mary would not have been tarrying in that garden alone, walking and talking with Jesus, if she hadn't been with him many times before.

William's funeral would probably not have happened at our church without a hundred or so prior moments. It needed that moment at a session meeting when church leaders voted to start

---

### Hey, Adam

Give me the green side of that apple,  
the tree side, puckery, crisp.  
And your mouth, stop sunning it.

Here! Give me a kiss.  
On second thought, take it back! When you  
domineered the animals, your fingers

useless in fists, I looked the given  
in the mouth (your horsing and naming,  
your curses). The gist: We've both had our due.

The worm's in us. Yum. And we're in this  
together. The risk: Come. Whet wit  
with me. Defy! Deify.

I'm a northerner, shade-grown, tall. I can reach  
the top fruit, but no higher. See that Winesap,  
King—you name it—up there? Catch

and imagine them huge—logo balloons,  
image parades snaking the earth,  
peopling the sky.

The day is still vivid in my mind. What is it about the experience that won't let me go? I think it's that we had a chance as a church not just to talk about Holy Week but to live it out, to feel it in our bodies, our veins pumping with adrenaline and our backbones bracing with what felt as much like craziness as courage. The breaking of tortillas hummed with sacramental power. And when the Salvadoran community said William's name aloud, insisting that he was a beloved child of God, it felt baptismal too. We witnessed a re-membering, a putting back together of something that should not have been broken. It was the church being the body of Christ.

---

Rebecca Messman is associate pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church in Herndon, Virginia.

Muriel Nelson

## Against the odds, some small churches thrive

A recent report detailing the spiritual, demographic, and financial challenges faced by small congregations meant little to Robin Bartlett, pastor of First Church in Sterling, Massachusetts.

"This does not look like a dying and sad church; it looks like a vibrant and active church on a Sunday morning," said Bartlett of her congregation. She usually sees 130 people on Sundays in a sanctuary built for days when more than 300 came to worship.

In the past year, 30 new members have joined, including young adults such as Ann Taft, 28, who delighted in the warm welcome at First Church.

"Everyone was just so excited that I was there," she said.

More people in the pews, more energy for programs, more funds to maintain the roof—these are all keys to survival for such small congregations, according to the latest Faith Communities Today report, released in January by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research.

Of the congregations surveyed, those with fewer than 100 in weekend attendance rose to 58 percent in 2015, up from 49 percent five years ago.

David Roozen, author of the report *American Congregations 2015: Thriving and Surviving*, wanted to highlight signs of hope in the research by asking about innovation, growth, and positive change, particularly in those very small churches.

He analyzed data from clergy and senior church leaders at 4,436 U.S. congregations. Ninety percent of those were Protestant (22 percent mainline and 68 percent white evangelical or historically black congregations) and 6.5 percent were Catholic. Although congregations serving Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and

other religions were represented, they were too few for analysis.

Survival is relatively easy to measure.

When Jonathan Iguina arrived three years ago at Iglesia Cantico Nuevo (New Song Church), a Pentecostal congregation in a commercial plaza in Longwood, Florida, it was on the verge of shutting its doors. The last 19 people in the congregation welcomed the new pastor the first Sunday—and never came back.

Iguina dug in. He cold-called former members. He found musicians to play the instruments left behind. He cut "unfruitful" programs such as "a visiting ministry that wasn't visiting anyone" and boosted outreach to families with children.

As he has concentrated on "nurturing the people I found, setting a focus on drawing closer to God," Iguina said, attendance has inched up to 90 on Sunday mornings, and the church's debt has been replaced by a surplus.



**SMALL CHURCH:** Pastor Robin Bartlett hugs a member of the First Church in Sterling, Massachusetts. The congregation is one of those affected by trends analyzed in a new report on congregations with fewer than 100 in attendance.

Cantico Nuevo is an exception, according to the study's grim overall findings for congregations under 100 in weekend worship: only about 18 percent say they're thriving, and 29 percent declare themselves OK.

Meanwhile, two mainline churches in northern Virginia are selling their grounds to nonprofit groups that will build affordable housing. And in the Southern Baptist Convention, a report showed an average of 1,000 churches a year disappear from the denomination's database.

Roozen found that congregations willing to "change to meet new challenges" fell to 62 percent in 2015, down from 74 percent a decade ago.

"It comes down to being all you can be in a religious setting," he said. "These congregations feel they are energetically living out their understanding of their call."

Hope thrives where change is welcome, Roozen said. "Thriving congregations are nearly ten times more likely to have changed themselves than are struggling congregations."

Nancy Ammerman, professor of sociology of religion at Boston University, observes that those aging congregations slipping toward insolvency "can take a long time to die because a handful of really determined folks will keep [them] going."

A church can continue "if they are willing to revolutionize themselves," she said. "People haven't lost the urge to congregate together spiritually. But how they do it is being expressed differently, and the churches that do well are reshaping constantly."

Jon Brown left a denominational headquarters job to lead a congregation of 45 participants at Old Bergen Church

PHOTO BY MATT LUCARELLI / COURTESY OF FIRST CHURCH

in Jersey City, New Jersey. Five years later, Old Bergen, a multiethnic, multiracial congregation, averages 100 people in the pews on Sundays—and tries new things constantly.

“If we are only concerned with the numbers, that becomes discouraging and a trap,” he said. “It could be that we have just a small faithful group of people continue to be the membership, but there is a ministry to the community that is a powerful witness of God’s love and grace.”

Even as they streamlined the programs inside the congregation, members ventured outside, with simple, low-cost activities such as making empanadas to hand out at Pentecost or taking an occasional prayer walk through the city, asking strangers, “How can we pray for you today?”

Old Bergen Church has two advantages over many small, old, urban churches. It has an endowment to support the facilities, and its downtown location is proving to be a blessing. Six new housing towers, designed for urban professionals commuting to Manhattan, are being built within four blocks of the church.

These advantages “take the anxiety and pressure off me as a pastor,” said Brown. “We aren’t absolutely living on the edge. It’s very possible that our best days are still ahead of us.”

In Roozen’s study, the percentage of congregations that reported more than 2 percent growth in worship attendance was at 45 percent, down from 57 percent in 2005.

Congregations that beat the 2 percent growth rate were located in new suburbs (59 percent); offered “very innovative worship” (53 percent); and served fewer than a third seniors (47 percent).

While attracting young adults and families is a challenge in any location at a time when “church shoppers” move amid congregations, fewer churches were making this age group a priority, Roozen said.

Doug Davis, who grew up attending First Church in Sterling and who at age 50 is the youngest deacon, said church elders looked around and saw few young adults in the pews. Davis said, “We realized we were falling behind in



**INTERGENERATIONAL LIFE:** Bob Kneeland, left, and Jackson Crosby ring the church bell at First Church in Sterling, Massachusetts.

energy and that was no way to be vibrant.”

Bartlett, the 39-year-old pastor of First Church and a married mother of three, started a “pub theology” night aimed at millennials. It was such a hit that older congregants complained, “We like beer! We want this, too!” So she’s added a second night, open to all ages.

Ann Taft is part of the young adult group and looks forward to discussion nights, dubbed “Eat, Pray, Learn.” Her husband, Andrew, once a “militant atheist,” is now on the operations committee. She serves on a task force investigating how the church can be more open to gays and lesbians.

Taft recalls when they were new in town and shopping for a church. She soon found “there’s no time to search out and explore every theology,” and ultimately she took Bartlett’s advice: “Choose one and go with it, and let that be the way God is revealed to you.” —Cathy Lynn Grossman, Religion News Service

## InterVarsity leaders back Black Lives Matter efforts during student conference

InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, an evangelical college ministry, issued a call to support the Black Lives Matter movement at its yearly student missions conference.

In the United States, more than 41,000 college students are involved in InterVarsity chapters. Since the 1940s, InterVarsity’s Urbana missions conference has brought together thousands of its students for four days of seminars, worship services, and meetings.

While the name of the conference still refers to its longtime location at the University of Illinois, the conference is now held in St. Louis—13 miles from Ferguson, Missouri.

Given that location, as well as InterVarsity’s commitment to both social justice and the diversity of its students (more than a third are ethnic or racial minorities), it was not surprising that there was some mention of racial inequality. But InterVarsity went further.

The first sign was the worship team. Its members wore Black Lives Matter T-shirts and sang gospel songs. Then Michelle Higgins took to the stage. Higgins directs Faith for Justice, a Christian advocacy group in St. Louis (she also serves as worship director at South City Church). She’s active in the Black Lives Matter movement in the St. Louis area, and she challenged the students to listen to the stories of the movement and get involved.

She noted that Christians have been willing to be political activists on issues such as abortion but not on issues such as racism and inequality.

“Black Lives Matter is not a mission of hate,” she said. “Black Lives Matter is a movement on mission in the truth of God.”

Higgins concluded by leading the students in call and response of the Black Lives Matter chant: “I believe that we will win!”

InterVarsity’s move to embrace Black Lives Matter builds on decades of multi-

PHOTO BY MATT LUCARELLI/COURTESY OF FIRST CHURCH

ethnic and multiracial work. InterVarsity began in the 1940s as an integrated ministry that officially rejected racism. After a couple hundred black students at the 1967 Urbana meeting called for further action by InterVarsity, the organization made reforms.

One of the responses by InterVarsity was to invite Tom Skinner (1942–1994) to Urbana '70. Skinner's sermon laying out the history of racism in America and evangelical churches' complicity still echoes within InterVarsity.

Skinner told the students at Urbana '70 that during segregation, "the evangelical, Bible-believing, fundamental, orthodox, conservative church in this country was strangely silent." The churches, Skinner said, supported the status quo on slavery, segregation, and civil rights.

Skinner's message came after the early battles of the civil rights movement. During the 1950s and 1960s, evan-

gelicals, even when they opposed segregation, stayed clear of joining the civil rights movement.

InterVarsity released a statement about its action regarding the Black Lives Matter movement on December 31, the last day of the Urbana conference, where half of the participants were people of color, the organization reported.

"InterVarsity does not endorse everything attributed to #BlackLivesMatter," the statement said. "For instance, we reject any call to attack or dehumanize police. But—using the language of Francis Schaeffer and Chuck Colson—we are co-belligerents with a movement with which we sometimes disagree because we believe it is important to affirm that God created our black brothers and sisters. They bear his image. They deserve safety, dignity and respect." —Tobin Grant, Religion News Service; added source

## Islamic revival movement quietly sweeps Middle East

Abu Murad surveyed the captive audience in the mosque in West Amman, Jordan.

"I was a Muslim," he began, "but I did not know Islam."

He talked about his past failings, of being too distracted by worldly pleasures to pray regularly. He evoked tales of the prophet Muhammad's companions who trekked hundreds of miles and braved bandits and armies to spread the word of Islam in the seventh century.

The Islamic world has never been more in need of a spiritual revival, he said. If the prophet's companions sacrificed their lives to preach Islam, surely Muslims today can do the same thing.

At first, the 60 men at the mosque stuck around out of curiosity or politeness. But now, nearly all are listening intently.

"Religion is not just prayer, it is action!" Abu Murad said, his voice rising. "It is effort! And we Muslims have never been more in need of action."

Then comes the moment of truth: "Who's willing? Who's ready?" he asked.

Dozens of hands shoot into the air. Men young and old, in Western suits and white ankle-length garments, some leftists, others Islamists, all pledge themselves to one of the fastest-growing Islamic movements now sweeping the Middle East: Dawah and Tabligh.

What began as a revivalist movement for a beleaguered Muslim minority in British-ruled India has become a global phenomenon that may have as many as 50 million followers.

Their task is to travel lightly and spread the word to fellow Muslims—from village to village, mosque to mosque—so that more are brought into the fold. With only backpacks, sleeping bags, and a simple message, Dawah activists go door-to-door in more than 200 countries, including the United States. They fund their own efforts and often depend on locals for meals.

Dawah seeks to show Muslims that the injustice and oppression they face in countries such as Syria are a symptom of

RELIGION NEWS PHOTO BY FREDRICK NZWILI



**CROSSES OF REMEMBRANCE:** A young woman walks by a memorial in Uhuru Park in Nairobi, Kenya, for the 148 people at Garissa University College, mainly Christian students, killed in April by militants from al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda's affiliate in Somalia. Faculty and administrators at Garissa returned to work in January, nine months after the gunmen's siege of the campus forced its closure. Fewer than 150 students attended when classes resumed, some of them newly registered. Before the attack, the public university, in the country's northeast, had about 800 students, but most have transferred to other schools. George Ogalo, national director of the Fellowship of Christian Unions, which worked with students who lived through the attack, said it was too early for survivors to return. "They have scars and wounds both physically and psychologically, which are still too fresh," he said. —Religion News Service, The Christian Science Monitor

a society that has lost its morality. They insist that the solution lies not in armed resistance or political activism but in spiritual practice.

When Muhammad Ilyas Kandhlawi began his revivalist movement in north-west India in 1927, it was a response to a dominant Hindu culture that Muslims feared could sweep away their traditions. Kandhlawi, director of an Islamic school, wanted to take his teachings from the classroom to the common man and woman.

In Urdu, it was dubbed Tablighi Jamaat, or proselytizing group. Its name later evolved to Dawah and Tabligh in Arabic, meaning “calling and proselytizing.”

Dawah has roots in the Deobandi school of Sunni Islam that emerged in northern India in the 19th century. Deobandis sought to educate Muslims and encourage their spiritual growth. The Deobandi movement was split by the partition of India in 1947, yet remains influential in Pakistan.

Today, Dawah leaders say their decentralized movement, with headquarters in India, is not bound to any school of thought. Its biggest annual event is a three-day prayer and fast held in Bangladesh that attracts as many as 5 million followers, making it the largest gathering of Muslims in the world after the Hajj pilgrimage.

Dawah activists often have no formal education or training. The movement has no website or social media channels, and supporters don’t broadcast their teachings via YouTube. Leaders even forbid delivering the Friday sermon that is the soapbox of the Arab street.

Instead, every day thousands of groups of Dawah followers go on door-to-door missions, called *kharooj*. They dress in the flowing white robes worn by Muhammad and his followers, complete with white turbans. They give a two-minute speech, offer a blessing to the people they visit, and make one request: that people join them for prayer and a brief lecture at the neighborhood mosque.

In their lessons, drawn from Qur’anic verses and the sayings of Muhammad, Dawah supporters encourage fellow Muslims to return to what they believe are the standards and morals of the prophet’s companions. And they ask



PHOTO © JEFFREY VIA CREATIVE COMMONS LICENSE

**MUSLIM REVIVAL:** *The Dawah and Tabligh movement has attracted as many as 50 million followers to its brand of Islam. Its largest meeting, the annual Bishwa Ijtema (world gathering) in Tongi, Bangladesh, gathers Muslims for three days of prayer and fasting. People come from 150 countries, allowing them to meet other Muslims from the international community. The 2010 event—shown here—was larger than usual, drawing an estimated 5 million people.*

worshippers to join Dawah and take part in *kharooj*.

A group of Dawah followers came to the doorstep of Mohammed Mustapha, who runs a minimarket in west Cairo, with an offer: come to the local mosque and tell your story. He soon became an active member.

Previously, Mustapha supported the Muslim Brotherhood, the region’s largest and best-organized Islamist movement. But he became disillusioned after he felt the Brotherhood failed to bring about a greater Islamization of Egyptian society.

“For years, we focused on political reform, parliamentary seats, and the presidential palace—and where did it get us?” Mustapha said. “Now we are fighting the real battle for the hearts of Muslims.”

Dawah activists say the movement may have doubled its membership in the past five years in Egypt, the most populous country in the Arab world, to roughly 300,000. Scholars say the setbacks suffered by political Islamists in Egypt and other Muslim countries roiled by the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings have created fertile ground for revivalist movements like Dawah.

“People who are disenfranchised with Islam and the way it is presented in the world gravitate towards [Dawah and] Tabligh,” said Ebrahim Moosa, a profes-

sor of Islamic studies at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, who has studied the group. It offers “an Islamic authenticity and identity, something that many in the Brotherhood are suddenly finding themselves searching for.”

Moosa first encountered the movement at a mosque in his native South Africa. It is “Islam 101,” he said. “It is good for the heart, but not intellectually satisfying.”

In an apartment in Amman, a 20-year-old Syrian man named Mohammed is struggling with a choice: Which armed group should he join?

Sitting across from him are three Dawah activists who have rushed to the apartment at 11 p.m. to extol the virtues of “loving thy fellow Muslims and non-Muslims” and reason with the young man.

“Sheikhs, I appreciate your time and wisdom,” Mohammed said. “But we are in a state of war in Syria. Muslims are being slaughtered every day. It is my duty, and our duty, to defend the Muslim nation—to wage jihad.”

Dawah activist Abu Adam smiled before responding: “But jihad is not waged on the battlefields; it is waged in the hearts of men and women, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Dawah is jihad.”

Mohammed gave a rehearsed response: “Surat Al Hajj of the Qur’an

says, 'Permission to fight is granted to believers against whom war is waged.'"

Abu Adam completed the verse: "Because they are oppressed and God has the power to grant them victory." He then added a saying of his own: "When those raise their swords against Islam, God will raise the swords of the nonbelievers against them."

He told Mohammed that the wars and catastrophes afflicting the Islamic world are just symptoms. "In order to heal, you must cure the disease, not cure the symptom—it is basic science. And the disease is Muslims' abandonment of Islam."

Mohammed relented. "OK, OK, I won't go right away," he said. "I will give it a chance."

"Forty days *kharooj*?" Abu Adam asked.

"Forty days," Mohammed said. "But if I still feel the call, I will go to Syria right away."

Leaving the apartment, Abu Adam was confident. "Once they open their hearts and join us, they never go back," he said.

Dawah activists said that over the past year they have convinced hundreds of young Muslim men in Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia that they should not join the ranks of IS.

"Corruption, unemployment, and oppression are driving Muslim youths to run away from their lives and run towards something greater," said Alaa Omar, a Jordanian activist. "We wish more would run to Dawah, but there are still some that run into the arms of jihadists."

In the United States and Europe, Dawah targets Muslim communities where it encourages second- and third-generation immigrants from Africa and Asia to return to their roots. It has Islamic centers in New York and Chicago.

In Britain, members of the movement have been accused of promoting the idea that Western values pose a threat to Muslims. Dawah urges women to wear the full face veil and gather in homes, not mosques. In pursuing *kharooj*, women meet with other women at a neighborhood "guesthouse."

Graham Fuller, a former Central Intelligence Agency analyst who monitored Islamist movements, is skeptical of claims that Dawah is a gateway to

extremism. He argues that it is a nonviolent alternative to armed groups and that its expansion should be welcomed.

The movement "is speaking to a very basic need to express one's faith beyond prayer," he said. —Taylor Luck, *The Christian Science Monitor*

## Women don't often turn to churches or pastors for advice on abortion

Churchgoing women who are considering an abortion often don't seek the counsel of pastors or others in their congregation, according to a recent survey by a Baptist polling group.

The survey was conducted by LifeWay Research, associated with the Southern Baptist Convention, and sponsored by the Care Net network of antiabortion pregnancy centers. California recently passed a law, following a campaign by abortion rights groups, to regulate such centers, which seek to prevent abortions.

The survey of 1,038 women who have had abortions asked respondents about their church attendance, who they talked to before they made a decision, and their perceptions about church attitudes concerning abortion.

The survey found that 36 percent of the women were attending a Christian church once a month or more at the time of their first abortion.

More than three out of four told LifeWay that their church had no influence at all in their decision to terminate pregnancy, and 65 percent said they felt church members are judgmental about single women who are pregnant.

Catherine Walker, who runs Life After Decision, a church-based outreach to women after abortion, recognizes such sentiment as she thinks about women she has counseled.

"None of them ever mentioned talking directly to any church staff or minister," said Walker, who has had four abortions herself. "Their shame and guilt is so strong."

Scott McConnell, vice president at

LifeWay Research, said that the numbers of church-attending women who have had the procedure is "sobering."

At the same time, he said, if pastors "can change the culture in the church to make it safe, six times more women will have that conversation at church before they make the call."

In the United States, there are about 1 million elective abortions per year and 85 percent of women who have abortions are unmarried, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The survey found that seven in ten women who had an abortion identified themselves as Christian. Breaking that down, Catholic women represented 27 percent; Protestant, 26 percent; and nondenominational, 15 percent. Among Protestants, the top three traditions represented among women who had abortions were Baptist (33 percent), Episcopal (6 percent), and the Church of Christ (4 percent).

McConnell acknowledged that church staff may think they are offering help, but the message is not getting through to women facing unplanned pregnancies.

"There hasn't really been a lot of conversation or preaching or anything about Christians having abortions," said Roland Warren, the new president of Care Net, the national network of crisis pregnancy centers that sponsored the survey.

There has been increasing pressure from abortion rights organizations to regulate the pregnancy centers through legislation, such as California's Reproductive Freedom, Accountability, Comprehensive Care and Transparency Act, which Gov. Jerry Brown signed into law in October.

The centers will be required to notify patients that public assistance is available for reproductive services, and unlicensed centers will be required to post a notice that they are not licensed. Failure to comply could result in a fine of \$500 for a first offense. There are about 170 crisis pregnancy centers in California, and about 40 percent are licensed by California as providers of medical services.

"We wish we could get crisis pregnancy centers to stop spreading scientifically unsound messages," Amy Everitt, director of NARAL Pro-Choice California, said in an interview with *Mother Jones* magazine. —Timothy C. Morgan, Religion News Service

## People



■ For nearly 40 years, **Mary Scullion**, a Roman Catholic nun in Philadelphia, has spent her days amid homelessness, addiction, mental illness, and poverty.

Though she was named one of *Time* magazine's 100 most influential people, she rejects any celebrity.

"This is about all of us," she said. Her mantra is, "None of us are home until all of us are home."

Scullion is cofounder and executive director of Project HOME, begun in 1989 as a single emergency winter shelter for homeless men. Today, it has a \$30.5 million budget and offers a multipronged continuum of care aimed at ending chronic homelessness by going at its root causes. It begins with person-to-person appeals to the homeless to come inside. There it provides long-term supports—housing, jobs, education, medical care—to keep them from returning to the streets.

"We learned that shelter wasn't enough; people need homes," Scullion said. "They need jobs, education, access to health care. They need community."

Scullion's organization coordinates outreach teams and housing placements for all agencies serving homeless people in Philadelphia. The teams, which check daily on the homeless across the city, carry handheld computer-linked devices. They have real-time data on all residence availability in the city, so an individual can be placed in the right facility for his or her needs.

Project HOME has become one of the most effective homeless organizations in the country. It has spent decades studying, learning, and modifying its approach. Among America's ten largest cities, Philadelphia has the worst poverty rate but also one of the lowest rates of homelessness—and some attribute that to Scullion's efforts.

"I can't say enough good things about her," said Emily Riley, executive vice president of the Connelly Foundation, a leading benefactor of Project HOME.

A straight-talking, pretense-free daughter of Irish immigrants, Scullion is as credible to the homeless as she is to donors. In the face of not-in-my-backyard conflicts, where already-struggling residents fear a Project HOME facility will tarnish the neighborhood, she has moved in herself and personally committed to being a good neighbor. She lives now in a North Philadelphia Project HOME building she shares with clients.

"We see Sister Mary everywhere," said Ruben Rivera, who used to be addicted to drugs and now lives in a Project HOME's St. Elizabeth's recovery house in North Philadelphia. "There's not a person in Philly who doesn't know her, is there?"

At a recent meeting of St. Elizabeth's residents, a black-draped chair sat empty, representing a resident who recently died of an overdose. House protocol will have it stay that way for 30 days.

Scullion urges the two dozen men in attendance to drum up support for a planned recovery house among friends they may have near that facility.

"We need each other," she told the men. "And we need God's grace." —Mary Beth McCauley, *The Christian Science Monitor*

■ **Ed Dobson**, a onetime architect of the religious right who later spent a year "living like Jesus," died December 26 after 15 years with Lou Gehrig's disease, or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. He was 65.

Born in Northern Ireland, Dobson was the retired pastor of Calvary Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. In 2009 he authored *The Year of Living Like Jesus*.

"The way of Jesus is very hard," Dobson said. "If you take his teaching seriously, it will mess you up."

Part of that wrestling led him to vote for a Democratic presidential candidate for the first time, even though he disagreed with Barack Obama about abortion.

"I felt that Mr. Obama was closer to the essence of Jesus' teachings—compassion for the poor and the oppressed, being a peacemaker, loving your enemies, and other issues," he wrote in an explanation of his decision.



PHOTO VIA FACEBOOK PAGE FOR ED'S STORY

It was quite a turnaround for Dobson, who had served as an aide to Jerry Falwell and was one of the lieutenants of the now-defunct Moral Majority in the late 1970s and early 1980s, helping Ronald Reagan defeat President Jimmy Carter in the 1980 election.

"I believe that people, myself included, were well-intentioned, and our goals were noble, but we got caught up in the illusion that politicians really cared for us, and that political change would bring moral change," he said in 1999. —Adelle M. Banks, Religion News Service

■ **Daniel O. Aleshire**, executive director of the Association of Theological Schools, announced that he will retire before June 30, 2017.

Aleshire has worked with ATS for 26 years, first as associate director for accreditation from 1990 to 1996, then as associate executive director, before becoming executive director in 1997. ATS will mark its centennial in 2018.

"This decision comes at both the right time in my life and a time of considerable strength and capacity in the life of ATS," Aleshire said. "The association is on sound financial footing, with several grants from generous funding partners that will provide almost all of the financial resources needed through 2019."

James Hudnut-Beumler, ATS president, has appointed a search committee to assess the issues that the next executive director will need to address, identify the qualities and characteristics that person will most need to possess, and undertake the work of the search for a candidate to be elected by the ATS board of directors. The search committee will be broadly representative of the diverse ATS membership, who will be given opportunities to provide input to the search as it proceeds.

"We are most grateful to Dr. Aleshire," said Hudnut-Beumler. "He has been unfailing in his insightful leadership of all those in the constellation of theological education who have looked to him for guidance, and his expertise in the field is recognized worldwide." —Association of Theological Schools



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ASSOCIATION OF THEOLOGICAL SCHOOLS

# LIVING The Word

February 10, Ash Wednesday

**LATE IN LIFE**, my mother-in-law had two Amish caregivers. Both women were friendly, and one talked openly about having divinely inspired dreams. But neither of them prayed out loud, opting instead for the privacy and intimacy of silence. This is a fairly common practice among Old Order Amish, based on their interpretation of Jesus' words in this week's Gospel reading: "Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

My own spiritual formation included some instruction about when to pray: at bedtime (out loud), at mealtimes (usually sung), and as often as appropriate during Sunday worship (introspective silence, long congregational prayers, "joys and concerns"). But I don't remember learning much about how to pray—and I suspect this absence had something to do with my Sunday school teachers' desire for the authentic spirituality Jesus preaches about here. Having been taught by the previous, traditionalist generation how to pray by citing chapter and verse, my baby boomer teachers shifted their focus to the sunny side of discipleship.

As I enter midlife and consider my own child's formation in our Anabaptist/Mennonite home, I find myself dismayed by how difficult it is for us adults to talk about how we balance piety with other aspects of Christian praxis. As a theologian, I'm rather insistent that sound logic and studied scriptural interpretation be an integral part of our piety. But in my faith community, so many of us seem to tote around internalized lists of do's and don'ts. How can a passage like Matthew 6 become strange to us, so we can be seized by Jesus' instruction and its significance in our time?

"Lent is not tidy," writes Peter Mazar in his introduction to *A Lent Sourcebook*. The word *Lent* is related in its origins to both *spring* and *lengthen*; it is when the ground thaws and the daylight hours increase. "Our windows need washing," says Mazar, "our temples need cleansing, the Earth itself needs a good bath." Those of us who live in the watersheds of the Great Lakes can testify to Mazar's observation that "winter doesn't leave without blustery battles that push things over and mess things up and even break things. Lent, if we honestly face its fury, will leave the landscape littered with bits and pieces of ourselves."

In other words, our annual Lenten journey involves reckoning with life's external and internal storms. I want to accept my

responsibility for my sin, complicity, and hard-heartedness so that I may be counted among the faithful. I want to express my faith with authenticity and sincerity before the watching world. I want the Holy Spirit to help me bridge the existential gap between my external and internal selves.

This passage from the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus urges his listeners to consider their giving, praying, fasting, and wealth building, has a lot of wisdom in it. But reading it on Ash Wednesday—and pairing it with the proclamation of Joel 2—makes Jesus' instruction to carry out our religious practices in relative privacy land with irony and paradox. The imposition of ashes is surely a public display of piety, and this seems to be precisely what Joel's word from God is calling for. How on earth do we balance the quietness of our hearts with our participation in a very public call to repentance? How on earth can we be sure that we wear these ashes with a right spirit in us?

Maybe the answer is in the medium of the message: in the earth.

Walking with Jesus to the cross isn't tidy; it's dirty, dusty, and bloody. The liturgical declaration from Genesis 3:19—"Remember, human, that you are dust, and to dust you will return"—brings to mind the Hebrew wordplay *Adam/adamah* and its English corollary *human/humus*. At the heart of Jesus' call to humility is red earth, soil and blood. Our willingness to humbly submit ourselves to God's forgiveness and goodness is only as good as our awareness that we are formed from the earth—and sustained by it.

Human from *humus*: be humble. Don't just look for private places to express your piety. Look for wild spaces to be religious in.

In *Life Abundant*, Sallie McFague writes that "wild space is the shocking suggestion—even if only a suspicion—that all really are invited to the banquet, that every creature deserves a place at the table." McFague's wild dreaming leads to a question: "Could the wild space become the whole space—the household of planet Earth where each of us takes only our share, cleans up after ourselves, and keeps the house in good repair for future dwellers?"

Maybe this year, we should mix the palm ashes with soil gathered from wild places. "Sometimes the only antidote is to take more of the poison," writes Mazar. "On our foreheads we rub dirt: Eden gone to ashes, the dustbin emptied of a winter's worth of soot, last year's leaves riddled with worms, the broken earth turned by the plow, the dry earth thirsty for water to make it clay of a new creation." Marking ourselves with actual *humus*, actual soil—it's a silent prayer for all to see, alive with microbes, nutrients, and life.

# Reflections on the lectionary

February 14, First Sunday in Lent

Luke 4:1-13

ONE OF THE many patterns discernible in the Revised Common Lectionary is a shift from year to year in the people the Lenten texts focus on. Year A is most interested in the spiritual growth and development of new believers. In Year B, the ranks of the faithful—those deepening their relationship to Jesus Christ and at home in the church—are the focal point. This year, Year C, draws attention to those who are alienated from Christ and the church.

My husband and I are Year B people living among Year B people. We live in the bosom of community. We walk about two blocks to worship in a building that also houses my husband's massage practice. I have only a mile to travel to work (by car more often than I care to admit). Child care for our son is usually free or bartered and includes a doting auntie and grandparents. We are revitalizing the soil in the yard, helping it become more fertile and productive. We and our friends are part of an active local community of locavores, dumpster divers, and cultural creatives.

In Year C, as in Year A, the Gospel reading for the first Sunday in Lent begins with Jesus' sojourn into the wilderness, culminating in his temptation by Satan. We do not hear Mark's celebratory words from Year B that first proclaim Jesus' belovedness at his baptism, enabling him to withstand his adversary. So it's not immediately clear what the good news is for my friends and me in Luke 4:1-13.

In her theological commentary on this passage in *Feasting on the Word*, Lori Brandt Hale suggests that what makes this episode of temptation theologically significant for both Jesus and us is his steadfast refusal to betray his commitment to God's mission. "His responses come with the full knowledge that obedience to God will bring persecution, misunderstanding, and the cross," Hale writes. Sharon Ringe's exegetical comment in the same volume supports this reading, noting that Jesus is facing more than temptation—more than the wish to do something desirable but unwise, like taking an extra helping of dessert. Jesus is facing testing (*peirasmos*) of the will: the will to feed the hungry, rule the world with justice, and serve God faithfully. Can he affirm the wisdom of Deuteronomy 6:16, "Do not put the LORD your God to the test"?

Church folks often succumb to the temptation of certainty. This can lead to the betrayal of other people—betrayal is one of the things that paves the way out the church's door for my friends who are Year C people. Testing, on the other hand,

is a real issue for Year B people. We become so comfortable with our faith-formed habits and steady presence—prayer, weekly worship, hospitality, and nurturing community—that we don't always recognize interactions that test us. As Ringe wonders, have good things lured us into following a cozy Christ?

Ringe's incisive analysis gives us a window into the narrative themes Luke uses to help us see what it looks like to live a Spirit-empowered life. As Luke tells his readers the Jesus story, he shows us that even though Jesus does not turn stones to bread at Satan's invitation, he feeds those who hunger. Even as Jesus says no when Satan offers him political power, a vision of God's all-encompassing reign of shalom is at the heart of Jesus' ministry. Satan prods Jesus to leap from the temple and count on angels to stop his fall; Jesus, Ringe explains, "goes to the cross in confidence that God's will for life will trump the world's decision to execute him."

T. S. Eliot's verse drama *Murder in the Cathedral* chronicles the assassination of Archbishop Thomas à Becket by King Henry II's knights. The archbishop faces four tempters. The first urges him to consider his own safety and "leave well alone" lest his "goose be cooked and eaten to the bone." The second tells him that if he aligns himself with the king, he will receive the benefits of wealth and political power. Tempter three advises him to forge an alliance with the local barons to resist the king and "fight for liberty." Finally, the prospect of martyrdom rears its head as the fourth tempter declares,

You hold the keys of heaven and hell.  
Power to bind and loose: bind, Thomas, bind  
King and bishop under your heel.

Here is Thomas's reply:

Now is my way clear, now is the meaning plain:  
Temptation shall not come in this kind again.  
The last temptation is the greatest treason:  
To do the right deed for the wrong reason.

What if we reframed our Lenten discipline to tune into the moments when we do the right things for the wrong reasons? This is, I think, in keeping with Jesus' advice to us in the Ash Wednesday reading from Matthew 6, about how we inhabit our piety. Being a Year B sort of Christian in Year C gives me a chance to scrutinize the rationales I use for my lifestyle choices. I may have the right answer to an ethical question yet fail the real test: following Jesus wherever he might lead me.

# WASHINGTON ISLAND FORUM

## June 20–24, 2016

Join us for four and a half days of ecumenical  
worship, plenary presentations, discussions,  
spiritual renewal, and recreation in an  
idyllic setting off the coast of  
Door County, Wisconsin.

Registration: \$299

**Carol Howard Merritt** is a Presbyterian minister, an award-winning author, a consultant for the Center for Progressive Religion, and a columnist for the *CHRISTIAN CENTURY*. A founder and host of UNCO, an open-space “unconference” for church leaders, she is also known for co-hosting the *God Complex Radio* podcast.



## The Church on the Edge

with Carol Howard Merritt

New growth is arising in denominational churches, as people plant worshipping communities and revitalize existing ones. While each gathering looks different, patterns of renewal are emerging. What are some common characteristics? What sort of needs are these churches meeting? What can existing churches learn?

---

**Tuesday:** Introducing burgeoning church movements

**Wednesday:** Common characteristics of new communities

**Thursday:** The needs of a new generation

**Friday:** What existing churches and new communities can learn from each other

# LIVING The Word

February 21, Second Sunday in Lent

Luke 13:31–35

IN DECEMBER, we lost our last chicken. Hestia, a Buff Orpington hen, had been part of our household flock since it began in 2012. We saw raising chickens partly as an act of civil disobedience: our town didn't permit animal husbandry inside city limits, and we didn't see this as a very just law. Our flock eventually swelled to seven, but between predators, illness, and animal control enforcement, by last spring we only had Hestia.

As Hestia and her siblings grew up, they looked for places outside the coop to roost. My fluffy, curly, shoulder-length hair fit the bill. I would be sitting reading in our backyard when Hestia would flap up to my shoulder and nestle in my hair. It was quite a sensation. While I wouldn't say I felt like a mother hen, I did realize how instinctual it was for her kind to find shelter and safety under a "wing."

Since then, I have heard Jesus' avian simile in Luke 13:34 differently (his desire to gather the children of Jerusalem "as a hen gathers her brood"). But it wasn't until I read Alan Culpepper's reflections on this passage that I considered how Hestia's death is just as evocative as the times she nestled in my hair.

Some context: Luke, more than the other Gospels, presents Jesus as taking a single journey to Jerusalem—a journey detailed at length as a distinct section of the overall narrative. From 9:51 through 19:27, Jesus is involved in what Jane Schaberg describes as "intensive training in discipleship," public teaching through parables, and healing. As Jesus and his followers get closer to Jerusalem, the sobering realities of just how powerful—and therefore dangerous—his ministry is grow increasingly clear.

This week's passage indicates this growing awareness as Jesus and his company wend their way throughout Galilee. Still in Herod's territory, the Pharisees—whom we tend to regard as Jesus' antagonists—have come to warn him that he's treading on dangerous ground where the tetrarch is concerned. Jesus tells them to "go and tell that fox" that he's busy.

What I hadn't noticed before—mostly because I tend to encounter verses 31–33 and verses 34 and 35 as distinct units—is that Jesus contrasts the fox with a mother hen longing for her wayward chicks. "On the one side lurks the fox," writes Culpepper in the *New Interpreter's Bible*. "The Bible consistently depicts evil as dangerous and predatory, nothing one can flirt with without risking one's life." On the other side is an image that is redeeming and protective: "a mother hen who instinctively draws her young under her wing when danger threatens."

Culpepper sees references to the Hebrew scriptures in Luke's narrative, references that trace a pattern of perverted justice and foreshadow both Jesus' death and Stephen's: the stoning of God's prophets such as Naboth (1 Kings 21:8–14) and Zechariah (2 Chron. 24:20–22). In other words, Herod is a very

real threat to Jesus, but Jesus refuses to live in fear. Jesus and his growing community of disciples face a mixture of support and opposition, giving rise to both sadness and determination.

Hestia's injury happened when my husband was out of town. After dinner with friends, I pulled into the driveway with our toddler and realized that the car's headlights were illuminating a disturbing scene: a possum attacking our hen outside the shed. Frantic, I called my husband. With my son in one arm and my phone in the other, I couldn't open the gate separating me from our poor chicken. No sound I made would deter the possum, and the lack of sound or movement from Hestia gave me the impression that she was dead.

We went into the house. I was overwhelmed at the prospect of dealing with Hestia's remains in the morning. Then I heard her squawking cry—Hestia was not dead! Thanks to our next-door neighbors, her attacker was shooed off, and she was given first aid and shelter for the night. She made it through those long hours, but the possum had done serious damage to one of her wing joints. The best-case scenario was amputation; the challenge was finding a vet willing to do such a procedure. Each day that passed was a day that she was in a great deal of pain, infection spreading through her body. When my husband returned home, we made the decision to end Hestia's misery and her life.

"We live in a menagerie," Culpepper writes. "Evil threatens in the form of a fox, and the mother hen laments because her young are exposed but will not accept her protection."

Hestia was a mature hen, not a chick. Had she ever hatched chicks herself, I'm sure she would have protected her young with ferocity and tenderness. But what I witnessed in the attack is that even adult chickens are susceptible to predators. Despite his self-assuredness and self-possession in the face of danger, Jesus, the mother hen, has no wing under which to find shelter.

It reminds me of an old Epiphany carol that tells the story of the Magi seeking assistance from another Herod. They tell him that the star shining so brightly in his realm signals the birth of a "princely babe no king shall e'er destroy." This other fox of a king, who is dining on roasted rooster, doesn't believe them:

If this be the truth, King Herod said,  
That thou hast told to me,  
The roasted cock that lies in the disk  
Shall crow full senses three.  
O the cock soon thrusted and feathered well,  
By the work of God's own hand,  
And he did crow full senses three  
In the disk where he did stand.

Long live the chicken.

The author is Malinda Elizabeth Berry, assistant professor of theology and ethics at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary.



© Jupiter Images

# LIES

I started learning how to play the accordion when I was nine years old. For two months my parents drove me to my lessons. Then they decided I could get to the music school on my own. Their decision was the perfect setup for my agenda.

Every week I took a 25th Street bus to the West Side market, transferred to a Lorain Avenue trolley bus, got off at West 110th, crossed the street, ran up the stairs next to the greasy-smelling donut shop to the Lorain Accordion School, fumbled through the latest lesson, and scooted down the stairs and across the street to the gigantic Woolworth store. There one thin dime bought me a marvelous, flexible, plastic toy soldier to add to my growing collection. Mission accomplished, prize in hand, I took my trolley and bus route home.

My perfect setup didn't last long. My mother started to figure out—from the sound of the music I was making—that something besides lessons was making me enthusiastic about my Friday afternoons. There was a confrontation with no preliminaries. Mom got right to the main event.

"If you want to take lessons, fine. If you want to buy toy soldiers, we're not going to pay for lessons. Now, *which* do you really go for?" she asked.

"For the lessons," I lied.

Yes, it was a lie. But it's a lie that I've never regretted, because

later the music lessons were infinitely more important to me. They opened up worlds to me: people I would have never met, places I would never have visited, and working with or writing for world-class musicians. More important, I entered a new world of hearing, and perceiving, and self-expression, and, above all, a chance to create and get a sense of creation out of which all notes come.

*John Corrado  
Clinton Township, Michigan*

The box in the trash said "pizza roll." So why did my teenage foster daughter tell me that she'd had rice and beans for dinner? When I picked up her jacket, quarters fell out of her pocket. How had she paid for bus fare to get home from school? The questions began to pile up.

I learned that my foster daughter was a compulsive liar. She was telling lies to gain power from me, a person in a position of authority. Lying was related to issues of low self-esteem; it helped her feel more in control.

We didn't last as a family. The story is complicated, but one piece is that it's appropriate for teenagers to pull away from their adult caregivers in adolescence. We were trying to build a

family from scratch during this tumultuous time.

But I still wonder about the lie that I told her, the lie that my family would always be her family and my home her home. It came from a place of love, but life didn't follow the plan that I was using.

Ten years later she called me, and we caught up on each other's lives. Some dreams had come true for both of us. I am married now. She's become a mom.

She wanted to know if I was disappointed in her or angry with her, and I said no, I have only love for her in my heart. I'm proud of her for making good decisions that hold her family together. I told her that I think about her when certain songs come on the radio and still have boxes of photos of her. She said she thinks of me when she goes by my church, and I told her to stop in anytime. We didn't talk after that. The truth can be hard to believe and receive.

*Renée Wilson  
Chicago, Illinois*

When I was young my mother would slap my face whenever I expressed a strong feeling. When I was six years old, I decided to hold my breath until I died. My mother opened the bathroom door and there I was—red-faced, cheeks expanded, and holding my breath for all I was worth. She slapped me across the face and said I was too emotional.

At my seventh birthday party one gift I opened was a baseball mitt from my parents. I was so excited I spilled my grape Kool-Aid on the dining room table.

"The original, shimmering self gets buried so deep that most of us end up hardly living out of it at all. Instead we live out all the other selves, which we are constantly putting on and taking off like coats and hats against the world's weather."

*Frederick Buechner, Telling Secrets*

"I told you not to get so excited," she said, and slapped me.

When I was eight, I scraped my knee and came home crying. "Big boys don't cry," she said. "Stop those tears now." I turned them off like I'd turn off water from a faucet.

As the years passed I managed to do well in school and make some neighborhood friends. I was a good boy, and my mother's slaps, smacks, and screeching occurred less often. But her words were engraved on my mind and heart.

Fifteen years later I was a student chaplain at Billings Hospital in

Chicago, doing clinical pastoral education. I had just lost my first patient, a 16-year-old who died of heart disease. He was only eight years younger than me. As the chaplains processed "my" death as a group, someone asked me how I felt. I looked at him with a blank stare.

My female supervisor suggested I yell into a pillow.

"Why?" I asked.

"Just trust me and try it out," she said.

So I did. She encouraged me to yell louder and louder. I yelled until I was screaming into the pillow, exhausted.

After a lot of introspection, emotional experiences, therapy, and support from my wife, I've discovered the lie behind my mother's actions. I am not so emotional or too emotional. I am a man who is in touch with his feelings of being mad, glad, sad, and scared. When something comes to the surface now, I check in with my body to see what emotion needs to be processed or expressed. I have a choice. I can live a lie or feel my feelings.

As one CPE student told me, "You are a Cadillac of feelings in a Volkswagen body."

*Richard Vantrease  
Sarasota, Florida*

## The Buechner Narrative Writing Project

Readers are invited to submit first-person narratives (under 1,000 words) on the following topics:

**Feast**  
**Power**

Deadline: March 1, 2016  
Deadline: May 1, 2016

Selected essays will be published in the print or web magazine. Authors of the selected essays will receive \$100 and a free one-year subscription to the *CHRISTIAN CENTURY*. Send essays to [feast@christiancentury.org](mailto:feast@christiancentury.org) or [power@christiancentury.org](mailto:power@christiancentury.org).

This series is supported by a grant from the Frederick Buechner Center, which celebrates the work and concerns of the essayist, novelist, and pastor.

It was 2:30 a.m. and I had just dozed off. Suddenly I heard a knock at the fellowship hall door of the church. The police officer asked if everything was OK, and I responded as usual: "Yes, officer, we're having our usual prayer vigil." I've told more than one lie in my life, but this is by far the best one.

As a volunteer for the Divine Intervention Ministry at Tippecanoe Presbyterian Church in Milwaukee, I've gotten to know some wonderful people. Each night Earl painstakingly rolls the perfect cigarette and puts it behind his ear, patiently waiting for the designated ten minutes of outside smoking time at 11 p.m. Though Patty's life has brought a series of disasters, she never loses hope that "things will get better tomorrow." Sid fastidiously and cheerfully cleans the small bathrooms every hour on the hour. I am profoundly affected and transformed by these "street people" whose resilience, resourcefulness, and hope puts me, a retired white suburbanite, to shame.

When confronted with the "problem" of homeless people in her church's neighborhood, Pastor Karen Hagen and her church refused to be daunted. They responded by developing a nightly "prayer vigil"—they would provide a warm, safe place for people to stay during the cold Milwaukee nights, but since there was no way this small church facility could meet the city code, they'd call the shelter an all-night prayer vigil, one that is now greatly appreciated by the local police and neighbors as well as those who take advantage of the shelter.

The genius of the ministry is that the guests have the major role in managing their program. I've witnessed the amazing transformation of seemingly helpless people into competent managers of their own situation. They turn away people who are intoxicated or otherwise unable to cooperate. They determine the timing of smoking breaks. They keep the church clean. They "have each other's backs" as a community. I think this is what Jesus had in mind when he called together the most unlikely people to be his disciples and support community—in other words, *church*.

I've been ashamed of some of the lies I've told. But I have been proud to tell a police officer in the early morning hours, "We're having our usual prayer vigil."

Howard Bowman  
Oconomowoc, Wisconsin

I was ten minutes late to meet my husband because of a phone call, but as I got into the car, several other reasons for my tardiness popped into my head: there was road construction, I was responding to a neighbor in need, the cat got out the door and I had to chase it. These reasons all sounded better than the real reason.

I was startled by my determination to find excuses, but the little untruths remade my delay into something that was beyond my responsibility and control. It wasn't me, I imagined for a moment, but the mysterious workings of the universe that got in the way of being on time.

I had no plans to use these little lies, but they were there, pinching the cheeks of reality just enough to give it a rosy glow. It wasn't the first time these lies had slipped into my thoughts, and it won't be the last.

Told or untold, such lies bend reality just enough to obscure a part of me. I don't want to claim or explain: impatience (I'd love to stay, but . . .), peevishness (Of course I don't mind . . .), insincerity (Isn't that a beautiful dress/painting/haircut . . .), ignorance (Sure, I've read that book/seen that movie/remember you), or just inconsiderate behavior (Sorry I'm late: traffic). Lies construct a lovely facade that covers my shortcomings and selfish behavior—they are a kind of plastic surgery for my flawed character.

They shine a black light on the fear that this world and my life within it aren't good enough or holy enough as is. Honestly, that's the biggest whopper there is.

Johnna Fredrickson  
Wareham, Massachusetts

When a colleague and I were invited to be part of a former student's installation service, we agreed enthusiastically and traveled together to his town. Joe had many family members coming to the service, so we were surprised when he told us that we were all going to eat out that evening. I wondered how 19 of us were going to get in and out of a restaurant in time for church. I suggested that my colleague and I go ahead to the restaurant and put our name on the waiting list.

The restaurant was packed. I wiggled through the crowd to the front of the line and found an Amish man standing behind an old pulpit. Next to him was a hand-carved sign: "Please do not give your name until everyone in your party is present."

I understood the reason for the restaurant's policy, but I also knew that it would take a long time for a table for 19 to be ready. I said, "Yes, the name is Graves, party of 19." The Amish man with his beard and hat looked at me and said, "And is your whole party present?" Haltingly I said, "Yes." OK, I lied. But it wasn't as if I were trying to beat the system. After all, even the smaller parties were waiting for 30 minutes, so we'd be putting in our waiting time too. No big deal.

But my colleague disagreed. "You lied to the Amish?" he said. "You shouldn't lie to the Amish."

"By the time they call our name," I said, "Joe and his family will be here." Two minutes later came the announcement: "Graves, party of 19." I went back to the Amish man and said, "Yes, the Graves party—well, uh, we're not all here yet." I was nervous now, and I may have giggled a little. The man looked me in the eyes and asked, "Did you lie?" Dead silence. It was as if we were in church. The people immediately around us waited, wide-eyed and wondering.

I replied softly, "Yes, I lied." "Come with me," he said. I couldn't imagine what he was going to do. What kind of punishment do the Amish hand out to liars? I pictured stocks or caning. We followed him through the restaurant to the back,

where he opened the door to a banquet room. A huge table was set with bread and jams. He offered a gentle smile. "Have some bread. You are forgiven."

*Mike Graves  
Kansas City, Missouri*

**I**t was 1960 at Melbourne Heights Elementary School in Louisville, Kentucky, and Miss Grote (pronounced "Groaty") was telling us second-graders a Bible story. She could do that in a Kentucky public school in the 1950s and early '60s. Miss Grote liked scary stories, like the one about Lot's wife being suddenly reduced to a pillar of salt. Really? Just for looking back? The story haunted me because I knew that I would have looked back: in regret, in fear, or out of curiosity.

Miss Grote's Bible stories shocked and frightened me. I did not grow up in a churchgoing household, so I had no church family to mediate these stories for me. My parents told me that I started developing migraine headaches in the second grade. I also began to pray. Miss Grote had told us the story of a child who went to bed without saying his prayers. In the morning his parents found a pile of dust where his body had been.

When second grade ended, Miss Grote lost her power over me, and eventually so did the stories. I forgot to pray one night, and nothing happened.

Many years later I started to read the Bible for myself. The scary stories were still there, but so were many wonderful stories. I saw Jesus sitting on a sunlit hillside telling stories of divine love and mercy. I saw a starved, bedraggled, and disobedient son welcomed into his father's arms. I heard children called "great" in the kingdom of heaven. I heard Christ say, "Do not be afraid," and I heard God referred to as a tender-hearted parent.

I began to see that the relationship between God and human beings was something other than that of a tyrant and his cowering subjects. God was nothing like Miss Grote.

I was released from the lie. Now I can read all the stories of the Bible, the harsh ones as well as the comforting ones, in this greater context. And of course I still see Lot's wife turning her head for one last glimpse of home, then dissolving into sharp, salt tears.

*Lisa Kenkeremath  
Falls Church, Virginia*

**I**'ve always been a rule follower, so when my new baby's doctors and nurses told me to write down the time of every feeding and every wet or smelly diaper, I did. For the next 30 days I carried my spiral notebook and pen with me throughout the house.

I began to worry. Had I nursed my baby long enough? She was hungry again—I probably hadn't given her enough to eat! I shouldn't have had a cup of coffee—now I couldn't nurse. I was holding her too much; I wasn't holding her enough. I

couldn't leave the house with her—what if she got sick? I should leave the house with her and expose her to the outside world so she wouldn't become allergic to it for the rest of her life . . . or should I?

The lies of perfectionism crept into my professional life when I returned to work as a minister. You can't do both of these jobs, a voice said. You have to do both, another voice responded. Your child is getting too much attention from you, one voice said. Another responded: the church is getting the attention that your daughter needs.

Much of what was going on was postpartum depression—I was in a life-changing experience that I needed to wade through carefully. But meanwhile the lies of perfectionism, delivered through postpartum hormones, kept me from going through a single day without crying.

When a friend called to check on me, I broke down. My friend told me to sit down. Then she said slowly and deliberately, "You. Are. Not. Perfect." In that moment, I felt the lies cry out in defeat, just as Voldemort cried out in pain when Harry Potter destroyed a Horcrux. Then she said: "The gospel is not dependent upon you, but you are dependent upon the gospel."

I won't say I never feel shame, despair, or the pangs of perfectionism these days. But the air is a little lighter. By learning how to stop giving the lies of perfectionism a voice, I keep the lies at bay. These days I'm dependent instead on the gospel. The rules that I follow are written with grace.

*Anne Ross Bruce  
Glasgow, Kentucky*

**I**n my teenage years my mother was drunk more nights than she was sober. When my dad, my brother, or I confronted her about her drinking, she'd deny having had a drink, even though her slurred speech and stumbling gave her away. We'd perpetuate the family lie by saying, "Oh, it's really not that bad" or "Maybe she'll be better tomorrow." I guess we were protecting Mom or hiding our painful embarrassment—probably both.

But there was a more sinister and demonic lie. My mother suffered from low self-esteem and criticized others relentlessly. She spared no one her wrath. One of her favorite targets was my dad's sister, who, according to my mother, was either a witch or a bitch. As a result our relationships with my aunt and uncle and our cousins were strained. We didn't socialize with them. We didn't share holidays. And for many years I believed that my aunt was the problem.

I became a Presbyterian pastor, so when my aunt died of cancer, her children invited me to participate in her funeral service. To help me prepare, they sent me an envelope overflowing with sympathy letters. What I read amazed me! My aunt had been the wife of a U.S. Navy captain and had taken a loving, motherly interest in the younger officers and their wives. She'd also been a devoted spouse, a caring mother, an elder in her church, and a volunteer in many charitable organizations. She was a remarkable and gracious woman.

As I stood with her husband and four daughters at the

ZADIE SMITH  
GEORGE MUNDERS  
TOBIAS WOLFF  
JAT ANDERSON  
CHRISTIAN WIMAN  
JOHN DARNELLE  
MALLORY ORTEGA  
MIKOTO FUJIMURA  
PAUL HERTING  
DAVE HARBO  
MARY WHEEL  
JENNIFER VALDEZ-CHAVEZ  
VALLEY WORKS  
CHOCOLINOMIA  
TAYLOR DE KAWERS  
SHARON MONT

# FESTIVAL OF FAITH & WRITING

2016  
APRIL 14-16

CALVIN COLLEGE  
GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN

Welcoming community  
Inspiring writers  
Energizing conversations

VIEW THE FULL LINEUP & REGISTER TODAY

**FESTIVAL.CALVIN.EDU**

@FFWgr

/ffwgr

cemetery, a single thought kept running through my mind: "Ignoring God's commandments, we violate the image of God in others and ourselves, and accept lies as truth."

Those words are part of the Presbyterians' "A Brief Statement of Faith," and I'd spoken them so often that they'd become part of the fabric of my faith. Now these words came back to me with the force of Nathan's words when he confronted King David about his adultery.

"We accept lies as truth." That's what I'd done, due at least in part to the dysfunctional alcoholic family in which I grew up. For far too long I had a distorted view of the truth about my aunt, who lived a beautiful, grace-filled life.

By telling the truth now, perhaps I can find healing for the family disease of alcoholism.

*Albert G. Butzer III  
Norfolk, Virginia*

At one time in my life I believed that making a lot of money was the key to a good life. I fully committed myself to the deception. I worked day and night, seven days a week, in the insurance business, and yes, I won sales awards and made a lot of money. But in the process I neglected my family, my health, and my soul.

Late one night I came home from another long day of work. As was often the case, my wife and young son were already asleep. I rarely saw them in those days. I was too wired up to sleep, so I turned on the TV and watched a late-night classic movie—*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, based on the play by Tennessee Williams.

It's the story of "Big Daddy," a rich and powerful man who had all the things money could buy: a big southern mansion, 28,000 acres of fertile farmland, and millions of dollars in stocks and bonds. He also had an alcoholic son, colon cancer, and the certainty of death in the near future.

At the end of the movie *Big Daddy* and his son are in the basement of his mansion. For one brief moment I saw Big Daddy's masks of power and wealth stripped away, and I realized that he wasn't wealthy at all. He had a shallow relationship with his wife. He was estranged from his son, and his daughter's only concern was getting a share of his estate. He had no significant relation-

ships; he didn't even know the names of his servants. He knew no love, no purpose in life, no faith, and no meaning.

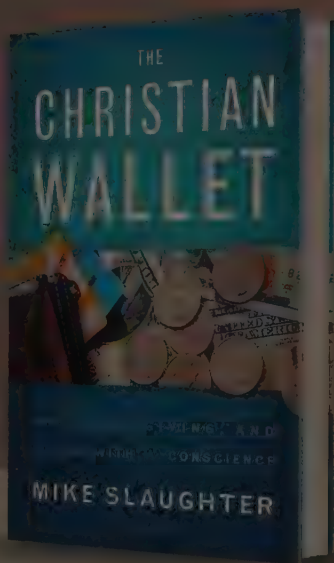
It was a powerful moment for me. I realized that if I continued on my present course, I would end up just like Big Daddy, rich in material things but bankrupt in things that really matter. God used that movie, along with several other experiences, to say, "You are chasing after the wrong dream. Money is not what matters most." Soon afterward I quit my job, went to seminary, and began my vocation as a minister. I've never regretted the decision.

*Martin Thielen  
Cookeville, Tennessee*

## NEW FROM MIKE SLAUGHTER

"Helpful resources, compelling research, and motivating stories make this a practical, thought-provoking, and often entertaining book."

—Publishers Weekly



Hardback • \$20.00

Every Christian knows that we are called to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. But what about our wallet? Best-selling author Mike Slaughter offers a comprehensive look at how Christians use their money and the impact of what we buy in today's culture of consumerism.

**WJK** WESTMINSTER  
JOHN KNOX PRESS

1.800.523.1631 • [www.wjkbooks.com](http://www.wjkbooks.com)

Randomness can have purpose

# God's dice

by James Bradley

WHEN CHARLES DARWIN declared that evolutionary variations occur by chance, many of his contemporaries were alarmed, worrying about the implications of chance for people's belief in the God who designed the world. The very mention of chance in the mid-19th century hinted at a godless universe.

In the early 20th century, chance began to play a key role in physics too. In 1928 a group of physicists centered in Denmark formulated the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics, which stated that elementary particles possess a fundamentally indeterminate nature. Albert Einstein had significant misgivings about such claims for indeterminacy, and he famously expressed these by saying, "God does not play dice." Einstein made this remark too often for Niels Bohr, one of the Copenhagen group, who retorted, "Albert, stop telling God what to do."

Western science and religion long assumed that we live in a coherent world that can be understood. Classical Christian thinkers argued that the order, harmony, and beauty of the world clearly point to a designer. The existence of randomness in biology and physics has undermined such arguments for many people.

Darwin, unable to see evidence for an underlying intelligence behind the process of evolution—which operates by chance variation and natural selection—concluded that evolution was "unintelligent." He also felt that evolution was cruel in a way that could not be reconciled with the existence of a loving God. His concerns have become part of the fabric of contemporary culture.

But much of the theological concern about randomness arises from either misunderstandings about what is being claimed or an ambiguity in the terminology. I have worked my whole career in the field of probability and statistics, in which randomness is a regular topic. The existence of randomness has not led me to doubt the Christian faith, for I have no trouble believing that indeterminacy can be purposeful.

Before we get to that topic, let's begin with terminology. Greek philosophers used the word *chance* to refer to events that were gratuitous, unplanned, and apparently without intelligent direction or design. The Greeks deified this aspect of experience in a goddess, Tyche, whose name literally means luck. In the three centuries preceding the birth of Christ, fortuitous and unpredictable events in the lives of a person or a city were typically attributed to her action. If your city experienced

a drought or a flood, that was Tyche's doing. An image of her appears on many coins of this era, and temples were built to honor her. The earliest Christian thinkers denied the existence of Tyche and rejected the notion that chance played a significant role in people's lives. Nevertheless, elements of Tyche's legacy live on, as in gamblers' references to Lady Luck.

Chance in the Greek sense is quite different both from what Charles Darwin meant in his study of evolution and from the scientific concept of randomness. The Greeks meant that a certain amount of unpredictability was a part of human experience. Darwin meant that he could not see purposefulness in the process of evolution. Much of the theological anxiety surrounding this issue arises from a confusion of the two understandings.

## God's way of overseeing the world is subtle.

Complicating things further, randomness means different things in different scientific disciplines. In mathematics, randomness means unpredictability. In the field of statistics, randomness refers to the relationship between individual numbers and large collections of numbers. While individual numbers are not predictable, the overall distributions may follow certain well-understood patterns.

For biologists, randomness means that there is "no correlation between the production of new genotypes and the adaptational need of an organism in a given environment" (to quote Ernst Mayer). In other words, mutations are not a response to the environmental opportunities available to a species. Elliott Sober adds: "There is no physical mechanism (either inside organisms or outside of them) that detects which mutations would be beneficial and causes those mutations to occur." The key meaning of randomness here is independence from environmental factors. When joined with natural selection, random variation in offspring provides the foundation of evolutionary theory.

Nothing in any of these concepts of randomness, however,

---

*James Bradley is professor emeritus of mathematics and statistics at Calvin College.*



Photo by John Brueske

excludes the possibility that randomness can be purposeful. And a reference to causelessness could simply mean that the cause is unknown. It could also be interpreted as lacking a *material* cause. Some Christian thinkers have seen “causeless” events as occasions of divine action.

Conflating chance and randomness imports into science the Greek sense that chance events are gratuitous. But because the universe involves randomness does not mean that it is without purpose or meaning. That question remains open.

**B**efore roughly 1600, explanations of natural phenomena typically included a reference to purpose. In Aristotle’s view, everything has a final cause, a *telos* or “end,” for the sake of which it happens. In the course of the scientific revolution, however, Aristotle’s analysis of final causes was judged to be circular and vacuous. It seems only to describe what happens, as when he said that heavy objects fall because they have an inherent tendency to return to the earth, or that sparks fly upward because the true home of fire is in the heavens.

Pressing that same argument, Francis Bacon wrote that “inquiry into final causes is sterile.” Inquiry into final causes—teleology—dropped out of scientific practice. Galileo and Newton saw themselves as describers of phenomena, focused on the how, not the why. Today physical sciences explicitly exclude teleological explanations.

Yet biologists remain conflicted about teleology, because many biological phenomena appear to be directed toward a goal. For instance, while the beating of a heart can be described mechanistically in terms of muscle properties and electrical signals, that description omits the fact that the heart beats in order to circulate blood, which in turn carries oxygen in order to nourish the cells of a body. Mechanistic explanations in biology seem incomplete.

At the same time, many biologists are wary of explanations that suggest goal directedness. The “in order to” clause can be easily replaced by “for the purpose of,” and such explanations seem to head down the slope toward talk of an ultimate purpose rooted in an ultimate cause, and hence a classic philosophical proof for God.

But there are many ordinary ways that randomness can be purposeful. For instance, flipping a coin to decide who gets the ball first in a football game is widely seen as a fair way to make a decision. Board games often involve dice and introduce an element of uncertainty. In both of these cases, randomness is clearly purposeful: it serves the purpose of the game.

Random processes in our own bodies are purposeful as well. For instance, the delivery of nutrients depends on diffusion, a random process. The nutrients are carried into cells and waste products removed via diffusion through the cell walls. The human immune system does not include antibodies for every pathogen that could enter it; rather, it consists of a large number of building blocks. When a pathogen enters the body, these building blocks are randomly combined until an antibody is found. Then it is rapidly reproduced to counter the pathogen.

Even the aspects of evolution that Darwin saw as unintelligent can be seen as highly purposeful. For example, Darwin thought a lot about why giraffes have such long necks. Other biologists of his time accepted the Lamarckian view that as ancient giraffes stretched their necks to reach leaves high in trees, subsequent generations of offspring grew increasingly longer necks.

Darwin partially accepted this idea, but as he grew older he had reservations. For the Lamarckian account to be true, there would have to be some mechanism in the giraffes’ bodies that would enable their reproductive systems to detect the oppor-

tunity to reach more food if they were taller. In fact, every creature would have to have a mechanism that would enable it to detect competitive advantages in the environment and pass the related genes on. But what could such a mechanism be like? It would have to be unimaginably complex.

Today biologists would say that giraffes randomly produced a variety of offspring, and those with longer necks turned out to have a competitive advantage and hence were more likely to pass on their genes. The process of random variation plus natural selection provides a straightforward means of explaining how species adapt to changing environments in a way that transcends the capacity of individuals to adapt.

For Darwin, *unintelligent* meant offering no evidence of being guided by or originating in an intelligent designer. Yet that term is misleading, for I cannot imagine a process that could be more effective at enabling entire ecosystems to adapt dynamically to change than the one he describes. It's inefficient, perhaps, but not necessarily unintelligent.

So randomness can be highly purposeful. It can be orderly, too. Unlike the Greek notion of chance, in which pretty much anything can happen, randomness involves a limited number of options that are often well understood and whose probabilities are known. When someone rolls a die, there are only six possible outcomes and each is equally likely; it's not the case that any gratuitous thing can happen.

Furthermore, the aggregate of random outcomes can be highly structured and predictable. Some years ago, mathematicians proved the central limit theorem, which provides the theoretical foundation for much of modern statistics. It says that if one has a collection of measurements, no matter how diverse or disorganized, and one takes lots of random samples of the same size from those numbers, as the size of those samples increases the distribution of their averages will look increasingly like a bell-shaped curve.

This result is so astonishing that it prompted statistician

David Bartholomew to opine that "God can have it both ways," meaning that God can have all the power that low-level randomness (such as diffusion) provides as well as having order, structure, and pattern at higher levels.

When I teach this theorem, I often jokingly write on the chalkboard "QED. God exists." The presence of randomness in nature does not entail a fundamental irrationality or incoherence.

But if God uses randomness, doesn't that conflict with the notion that God is in control? Doesn't *random* mean being out of control?

Consider again the referee in a football game. The coin flip is carefully organized and accomplishes its purpose of providing fairness. The referee is in charge without determining the outcome of the flip. God does not have to be a micromanager to be in charge. A strict Calvinist might say that every event in creation has to be directly ordained by God. But the presence of randomness in nature would suggest that God's oversight is more subtle than that.

Much of what we perceive as random is not gratuitous but arises from complexity. For instance, cosmic rays are protons or atomic nuclei that originate outside our solar system and pass through it. With the right equipment, they can be easily detected. If one carefully records the precise time of their arrival, these arrivals satisfy all of the mathematical requirements to qualify as a Poisson process, a well-understood random process. The randomness results from two factors: there are lots of these particles and each acts independently of the other. But randomness like this is not the result of gratuitous chance or causelessness. It is simply a property of many complex systems.

It would be nice if all randomness could be accounted for by invoking the independence or complexity of systems. But it cannot. Deep mysteries remain. For instance, in spite of being the object of inquiry by philosophers and scientists since Aristotle, causality is far from understood. Can any event really be uncaused? That is, can some entities initiate action independently of any identifiable agent? Or are there hidden causes that are completely different from anything we currently understand? Are events that seem causeless to us really a venue for divine action?

Another challenge, perhaps the biggest one for theology, is how to reconcile the concept of a loving God with the seemingly gratuitous suffering of innocent creatures. Theologians have called this natural evil, and it has troubled philosophers long before and since Darwin. Both the scientific and theological mysteries associated with randomness are far from solved.

What we can say with confidence is that the claim, present in much popular conversation on religion and science, that randomness implies a universe without meaning or purpose is invalid. God's creation is amazingly subtle. Even something that seems like the epitome of disorder or randomness can be the means of accomplishing good things such as nourishing bodies and resisting diseases. It is part of an astonishing world that can turn low-level randomness into high-level order.

Finally, both God and creation have depths that we have not begun to plumb. This should not be surprising, given that God is infinite, as Christian theology has consistently maintained. **CC**

---

## The still pilgrim invents dawn

The still pilgrim climbs the Mountain of God.  
She somehow has not lost her way.  
Her feet find the prints where they have trod.  
The sun feels less heavy today.  
She holds him in her wind-chapped hands.  
She shoulders him like a child.  
She hoops him along the basalt sand.  
She heaves him high against the sky  
where he gilds the field gold.  
The pilgrim watches his slow rise—  
She loves the shadow show he throws—  
salutes the blue and shades her eyes  
and turns her back and goes.

Angela Alaimo O'Donnell

by M. Craig Barnes

## The post-anxiety church

**WHEN I SPEAK** at denominational gatherings, pastors often ask me to say something about the future of the church. The subtext of their invitations is, "If you have any ideas for survival, let us know."

The future of the church is a question that makes it way deep into my bones. I worry too. But the church has never looked less attractive than when it dresses in anxiety. Historically that's when we've made our worst mistakes. Fear makes us desperate. We throw the little money and energy that remains into trendy programs that make no substantive change. Or worse, we become fixated on finding someone to blame for our demise. These are expressions of despair, which is where anxiety lands after it slides to the bottom.

Some righteously reassure us this is the way people have always treated prophets who took courageous stands against the injustices of their day. The mainline church is dying, they say, because society cannot handle the hard truth its preachers proclaim every Sunday.

Others look longingly at evangelical congregations that appear to be growing and graft new market-driven strategies onto a centuries-old theological tradition. In some congregations the graft takes, but at considerable cost to the tradition. Eventually the historic roots wither, the tradition is lost, and all that remains is another construction driven by what the consumers want.

Still other church leaders cling to tattered 20th-century denominational bureaucracies that make it incredibly hard for the Holy Spirit to sneak in with a new idea.

Meanwhile most of the people who used to fill the pews of the mainline congregations long ago decided that the church has little relevancy to their souls, which are worn down by work, family, and a world that seems to be coming apart at the seams. They didn't leave in a huff. They didn't nail up 95 theses that called for reform. They wandered away and found that a Sunday morning spent with the *New York Times* or cheering for a child's soccer game came closer to a sabbath than what they found in a sanctuary.

Little good comes from getting fixated on the empty pews. The mainline Protestant church has to stop fretting about its future. The anxiety takes up the air and leaves the church too lethargic to offer anything to the world. The alternative response is for the church to do what it's always done at its best, what it did from the beginning: stop thinking about its future and sacrifice itself to its mission.

When I was working through my way through a graduate

program in the history of Christianity, I became convinced that there is no rational explanation for the church's survival over the past 2,000 years—there were many compelling political, intellectual, and social reasons for it to have gone out of business long ago. And none of those threats were ever as dangerous to the church as it was to itself. We've always been our own worst enemy when we fail to live out of the gospel we proclaim. But still the church perseveres.

The only possible explanation for the church's survival is that Jesus Christ chose to use it to continue his mission of bringing the kingdom of God to earth. He can certainly work outside of the church for this holy purpose, but we find our life in the calling to pursue the kingdom. Historically, every time we landed in the ditch, as the mainline church has done today, Christ pulls us out and invites us again to lose our lives to find them.

This means we have to stop fretting about our denominational structures, memberships, divisions, and futures; instead we need to immerse ourselves in the baptismal waters that proclaim the perfect love of God that casts out fear.

### Little good comes of being fixated on empty pews.

We have liturgies of the early church that date back to the second century. In essence they were funerals. Those who were about to enter the church would take off their old clothes as a means of putting off the old, anxiety-ridden life and walk down into the water. The waiting priest would place them under the water saying, "Buried with him in baptism." As they rose the priest continued, "Risen to new life in Christ." They put on new clothes as a symbol of putting on Christ. The rationale for this burial form of baptism was to make the members of the church go through "dying" and get it over with. Once they were no longer anxious about Caesar's persecutions of the church, they were free to boldly proclaim the gospel. You can't scare dead people.

It's a tragic irony for the mainline church to be anxious about its future when we are supposed to be a people who have already given up our lives. The church belongs to Jesus, and its future is in his hands. Fretting about the viability of our denominations only distracts us from the only thing that has ever given us purpose—keeping up with Jesus.

M. Craig Barnes is president of Princeton Theological Seminary.

# IN Review

## Into the dark with Dante

by Richard Lischer

Midway along the journey of our life  
I woke to find myself in a dark  
wood,  
for I had wandered off from the  
straight path.

With these words Dante opens his immortal epic the *Divine Comedy*, in which the poet-pilgrim's journey through hell, purgatory, and paradise represents every soul's quest for salvation. In an age that has largely discarded the myth of the three-story afterlife, why does the *Commedia—Divina* was added by a later publisher—retain its universal standing and appeal? I believe that the clue is in the opening tercet, for its images speak to the uncertainties of every generation, to those who have awakened, as from a dream, to discover that their lives and grand aspirations are half spent and that they are lost in an impenetrable darkness from which they cannot extricate themselves.

When we are in such a bind, our first impulse is to grab a map. But our maps of assured results and quantifiable outcomes, to say nothing of success, happiness, and love, have proved inaccurate or out of date. The mapmakers are as lost as we are. Then again, if you were lost in a dark wood of addiction, illness, or despair, which would you rather have: a map that may or may not be accurate, or a single faithful guide who knows the terrain, having walked it before? Dante's advice: Forget the map. Take the guide.

Protestant Christians will instinctively resist intermediaries and choose Jesus as their guide. But Dante's Christ dwells in the Empyrean, far above the worlds of Italian intrigues and American politics. He offers the poet Virgil instead, the classic ideal of reason, to guide the Pil-

grim through the multiple pits of hell and into purgatory. Virgil lives in Limbo, the home of greats like Homer, Aristotle, and Cicero, who did not know Christ and therefore are deprived of heaven. Virgil's pre-Christian status, however, does not diminish the value of his counsel, for his art "may be said to be God's grandchild."

Virgil is wise enough to know that the road to heaven must pass through a confrontation with human evil (and its gory punishments) in "the starless air of Hell" and must continue with cleansing on the Mount of Purgatory. Virgil has gone as far as he can go. Enter Beatrice, the allegory of revelation and the embodiment of divine love. Her shade soars above the courtly love tradition with which Dante himself was smitten. Just as Dante the poet transforms himself into the representative Pilgrim, he causes Beatrice to transcend her brief life on earth and become the eternal principle of purity, second only to the Virgin Mary. She will lead the Pilgrim to the highest terrace of Purgatory, the Garden of Eden, where together, "eager to rise, now / ready for the stars," they will ascend through the heavenly spheres to the Ineffable itself.

What are we to do with Dante? One answer comes from Rod Dreher, writer, journalist, and senior editor at the *American Conservative*. *How Dante Can Save Your Life* is his enthusiastic recommendation of the *Commedia* as a spiritual guide to overcoming life's problems and attaining spiritual blessedness. His book is a "reading memoir" in which the author's life story is paired with and located within a great book. One thinks of Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.

Dreher grew up in rural Louisiana under the unappeasable authority of his father, Ray Dreher, a man's man whose

## How Dante Can Save Your Life: The Life-Changing Wisdom of History's Greatest Poem

By Rod Dreher

Regan Arts, 320 pp., \$29.95

### Curiosity

By Alberto Manguel

Yale University Press, 392 pp.,

\$18.00 paperback

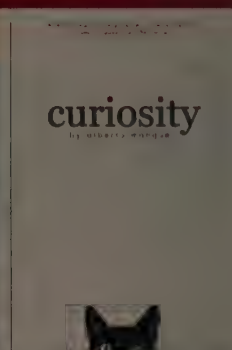
love of football, deer hunting, and all things country completely bypassed his bookish son. In a pivotal incident early in the narrative, Rod goes hunting with his dad and, unhappily, kills a baby squirrel. When his father finds him weeping over the squirrel, he pronounces his son a sissy and effectively disowns him. That his sister Ruthie effortlessly absorbs their father's values leads to an estrangement between brother and sister, to the extent that even her children have no regard for their uncle.

Incidents of slight and insult pile up in this family chronicle; the family dynamic is clear. What is not so clear is the motive behind it all. Why can't country people respect a young man's literary gifts? How is it that Rod's acceptance of a job in Washington, D.C., can unleash a tsunami of resentment on the part of his father and his sister? The reader wants to know more.

Dreher moved on from Washington to a succession of newspaper jobs in New York, Dallas, and Philadelphia as he built a successful career in journalism. But increasingly plagued by depression, phys-

Richard Lischer teaches at Duke Divinity School.

His most recent book is *Reading the Parables* (Westminster John Knox).



ical ailments, and spiritual ennui, he continued to be haunted by home. Eventually he decided to move his family back to his roots, to live among his kindred near Starhill, Louisiana. Once there, he and his wife repeatedly tried, without success, to satisfy his craving for their acceptance. The sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church led Dreher and his family to convert from Catholicism to Eastern Orthodoxy. Throughout the book he compares his own critique of the church's hierarchy with Dante's hatred of clergy and papal worldliness.

Dreher's struggles with his family and with poor health are the hermeneutic lens through which he reads the *Commedia*. At each step and misstep along the way Dreher draws a one-to-one analogy between incidents in the *Divine Comedy* and the concerns of his own life. In a section called "Dante's Exile—and My Own," Dante's enforced exile from his beloved Florence calls to mind the author's exile from his family home in Starhill. Just as Dante reveres father figures such as Virgil, the contemporary author worries that he has made a god of his difficult father. Just as the lost souls in hell are less than honest about their earthly sins, so Dreher confesses, "the story I told myself about myself and the people in my life might not be true." Thus each of Dante's observations offers a practical lesson illuminating the author's own pilgrimage. Following each chapter the author provides a how-to-do-it box summarizing the relevant lesson: "How to Refuse Defeat," "How to Let Go of Your Ego," and so on.

If the book is read primarily as a memoir, its exclusive reference to one man's story will make sense and be helpful. We all need help. Why not learn from the classic that is famous for its insights into the human condition? Yet—and I believe the author would agree—there is more to the epic than the first word of Dreher's title: *How*. There is something about the majesty of the *Divine Comedy* that should not be reduced to a self-help book—or even the appearance of a self-help book.

Greater than Dante's portrait of an individual soul is the *Commedia's* testimony to the justice of God. The poem's perfect symmetry, evident in divisions

and cantos of threes, the repeating triplex of rhyme, its ordered topography of the afterlife, and most of all, the justice meted out to sinners in symmetry with the nature of their sins—all of it witnesses to a righteous God. "The Providence that regulates the whole" does not always cater to our insecurities, solve our personal problems, or reflect our notions of right and wrong. The Pilgrim, who initially sympathizes with sinners in *Inferno*, later hardens his heart toward them in recognition of the necessity of God's judgment. Finally, at the very end of the journey, the shades of the just rejoice around the heavenly white rose. But God, who is not a shade, is veiled in light. There is no dying in the *Commedia*, for everyone is dead except God.

If Dreher's study of Dante is a book of answers, Alberto Manguel's *Curiosity* is a book of questions. Aside from their veneration of Dante, the two authors have little in common. Whereas Dreher

## FESTIVAL OF PREACHING and WORSHIP

April 11-14, 2016, Seattle

2016 theme:  
PREACHING + WORSHIP  
FOR JUSTICE

### Preachers:

Ayanna Johnson Watkins, DJ del Rosario, Eugene Cho, Ginger Gaines-Cirelli, Karen Oliveto, Paul Raushenbush, Quinn Caldwell, Ted Smith, and Tony Robinson.

REGISTER NOW!  
festivalofpreachingnw.org

LISTEN...  
PRAY...  
TAKE  
ACTION!

You can help create hope and opportunity by using and sharing with others the *2016 Lenten Prayers for Hungry People*. A 6 x 9 inch "table tent" includes scripture readings (from Year C of the Revised Common Lectionary), prayers, and actions for each of the five weeks of Lent as well as Holy Week. You may order multiple copies—free—for distribution to members of your church or community.

Lent begins with Ash Wednesday on February 10, so order your free table tents today.

To order *Lenten Prayers for Hungry People* visit:

[www.bread.org/lent](http://www.bread.org/lent)  
or call toll-free

800-822-7323



**breadfortheworld**  
HAVE FAITH. END HUNGER.

425 3rd Street SW, Suite 1200  
Washington, DC 20024  
[www.bread.org](http://www.bread.org)

applies the *Commedia* to a personal problem, Manguel universalizes it and lets it loose in the world. He frames each chapter with two questions, one from his own life, the other a universal dilemma. His chapters are questions: Where is our place? What are the consequences of our actions? What comes next? His dialectical approach is reminiscent of Dante's theological mentor, Thomas Aquinas.

With a spark provided by Dante, Manguel's questions lead to further interrogations of history and literature. For example, the horrors observed by the Pilgrim in the Wood of Suicides in Canto XIII of *Inferno* lead Manguel to conversations with Augustine, Samuel Beckett, and Shakespeare, and into wider considerations of contemporary violence. His interpretation of the poem's characters—and Dante himself—as immigrants evokes the hell of a refugee camp and the long train of migrants crossing not from purgatory to heaven, but from Syria to Germany. The Pilgrim's great-

grandfather prophesies Dante's fate and that of all refugees:

You shall be forced to leave behind those things you love most dearly, and this is the first arrow the bow of your exile will shoot.

And you will know how salty is the taste of others' bread, how hard the road that takes you down and up the stairs of others' homes.

You might have imagined by now that it is easier to enjoy Dante than to review books on Dante! I suggest that you choose one of the many English translations of the *Divine Comedy*—I have found Mark Musa's translation in *The Portable Dante* most helpful—and devote yourself to a long winter's read. Then draw from it your own conclusions—or questions. It may save your life.

## One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America

By Kevin M. Kruse  
Basic Books, 384 pp., \$29.99

Tracking the historical lineage of a movement or an ideology is seldom easy, but untangling the origins of the American baptism of free-market capitalism has been especially fraught. Max Weber famously suggested that Protestant anxiety over election, coupled with the Calvinist aversion to conspicuous consumption, created conditions conducive to the "spirit of capitalism." But the teachings of Jesus—blessedness of the poor, care for the least of these—hardly lend themselves to an apology for capitalism. And the book of Acts suggests that the earliest Christians were socialists, although that designation should be understood in a context shorn of socialism's 20th-century statist distortions.

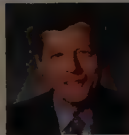
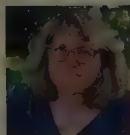
Building their case from scripture, evangelical reformers in the 19th and early 20th centuries excoriated capitalism as inherently inconsistent with the mandates of the New Testament. Charles Grandison Finney, the most influential evangelical of the 19th century, exalted Bible societies as models for commerce and opined that *Christian businessman* is an oxymoron because capitalism necessarily elevates avarice over altruism. During the Progressive Era, Protestants—the liberal Social Gospel theologians as well as the redoubtable William Jennings Bryan—sought to protect workers from the ravages of unbridled capitalism.

The Protestant embrace of capitalism appears to have evolved over the past century or so, and its comprehensiveness is evident in everything from sermons to stump speeches. To give just one example, in *Listen, America!* Jerry Falwell wrote that "the free enterprise system is clearly outlined in the Book of Proverbs." But how did we get here? Several books in recent years have illuminated this evolution. Darren Dochuk's *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt* traces the movement of evangelicals from Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Texas to work in the defense industries of southern California. *The Family*, Jeff

### Old Stone Church

## VISITING SCHOLARS PROGRAM

Bringing theological excellence to Northeast Ohio



**DALE P. ANDREWS** ■ February 7-8, 2016

*Prophetic Praxis: Wrestling with the moral injury of anti-racism*

**DIANA BUTLER BASS** ■ April 24-25, 2016

*Awakening the church to spiritual revolution*

**WALTER BRUEGGEMANN** ■ May 22-23, 2016

*Choosing against our chosenness*

**WILLIAM STACY JOHNSON** ■ June 12-13, 2016

*Why Christianity still matters: What comes next for mainline religion?*

**GARY DORRIEN** ■ July 10-11, 2016

*Race, the black social gospel and a "new abolition" as a nation prepares to vote*



"Contemporary voices  
speaking to contemporary issues"

Registration available online and by donation  
**OldStoneChurch.org**

Residence Inn  
Marriott 527 Prospect Avenue  
Cleveland, Ohio 44115

Special rates available.  
Call 216.443.9043 and ask for the  
"Old Stone Church" rate.

91 Public Square | Cleveland, Ohio | 216.241.6145 | OldStoneChurch.org



Sharlet's worthy though occasionally hyperbolic study of the Fellowship Foundation, shows linkages between Christian businesspeople and politicians. Bethany Moreton's *To Serve God and Wal-Mart* should also be added to the roster.

And now Kevin Kruse adds his take on the process in *One Nation Under God*. Kruse's narrative goes something like this: after the Bolshevik Revolution discredited the Social Gospel, capitalists faced an even more formidable challenge in Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. Organizations such as the National Association of Manufacturers responded by enlisting friendly clergy, including James W. Fifield Jr. of the First Congregational Church in Los Angeles, in their campaign of "Christian libertarianism." Fifield, sometimes known as "the Thirteenth Apostle of Big Business or the St. Paul of the Prosperous," was a willing shill, and he used his organization Spiritual Mobilization to sound the alarm about "pagan statism." Other ministers and businesspeople, including Norman Vincent Peale and J. Howard Pew, climbed aboard, and this unlikely coalition, abetted by the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency and an endless supply of money, made the case that Christianity condemns socialism in all of its guises, including the minimum wage, Social Security, and veterans benefits.

The Committee to Proclaim Liberty enlisted still more clergy to perform the marriage between capitalism and Christianity, and by the dawn of the Eisenhower administration, all of this had somehow morphed into a kind of Christian nationalism (Kruse is less clear on this point). Billy Graham played a key role, once opining that the Roosevelt and Truman administrations were a time of "spiritual drought" and suggesting that the Garden of Eden was a place with no union dues and no labor leaders. "I believe that organized labor unions are one of the greatest mission fields in America today," the evangelist declared.

Eisenhower himself, the only president baptized while in office, very nearly

embodied what Eugene Rostow called "ceremonial deism." Kruse quotes Eisenhower's famous line about government founded on religious faith—"and I don't care what it is"—and notes that the new president directed that cabinet meetings be opened in prayer (although he often forgot to do so). The National Prayer Breakfast was instituted just weeks into Eisenhower's presidency, and before long, at Eisenhower's behest, Congress fell over itself to insert "under God" into the Pledge of Allegiance and to emblazon "In God We Trust" on coins and currency. Eisenhower, Kruse writes, "succeeded in sacralizing the state, swiftly implementing a host of religious ceremonies and symbols and thereby inscribing—quite literally, in many ways—an apparently permanent public religion on the institutions of American government."

The remainder of the book is a tale of overreaching and reaction. Not content with references to the deity on the nation's currency, several members of Congress sought to revive Lincoln-era

efforts to designate the United States as a Christian nation. The most arresting account is that of the Becker Amendment. Following the school prayer decisions of the early 1960s, the proposed amendment in favor of school prayer enjoyed overwhelming popular and congressional support, and were it not for the delaying tactics of Emanuel Celler, chair of the House Judiciary Committee, the amendment would almost certainly have passed Congress and headed to the states for ratification. By the time Celler had completed his hearings, public sentiment had shifted, and the bill died. Other, similar efforts foundered as Americans came to their senses about the genius of the First Amendment and faced up to the emerging realities of pluralism.

Or did they? Kruse suggests, plausibly, that the religious right drew at least some of its energy from popular resentment over the loss of Christian hegemony, which they believed had existed in Eisenhower's America. It is certainly true that by the late 1970s leaders of the

## What Makes You Happy?

"Martin Thielen's new book, *Searching for Happiness*, is a captivating read. Using Scripture, science, and personal experience, Martin reminds us eloquently that happiness does not come from material things or external circumstances, but rather, real contentment comes from within us. At the end of the day, happiness is 'an inside job!'"

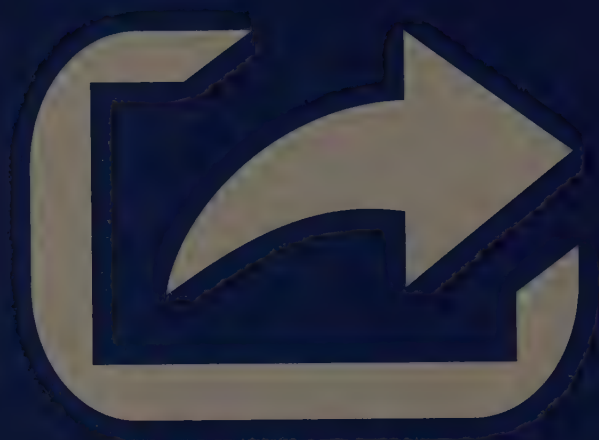
—JAMES W. MOORE, best-selling author and minister in residence at Highland Park United Methodist Church, Dallas, TX



Paper • \$16.00

Reviewed by Randall Balmer, an Episcopal priest and professor of religion at Dartmouth College.





# SHARE

all CENTURY articles online

Visitors to [christiancentury.org](http://christiancentury.org) can now read a few articles of their choosing each month, without subscribing. So when you read an article you find useful, you can e-mail it, tweet it, or share it on Facebook—and your friends and colleagues will be able to read it, too.

Learn more at [christiancentury.org/share](http://christiancentury.org/share)

religious right added lamentations about secularism and the absence of prayer in schools to their complaints about abortion and the loss of tax exemptions for racially segregated institutions. By the 1980s this unlikely fusion of Christianity, free-market capitalism, and Christian nationalism had emerged as a powerful movement, and that movement continues to define the political landscape in the United States.

Although the alliance between conservative politics and Christian nationalism is by now an old and oft-told story, the looping of free-market capitalism into that coalition is still puzzling. Unfortunately, Kruse's account relies more on correlation than causation. But perhaps that's sufficient. After all, who was financing all of these efforts to promote ceremonial deism and Christian nationalism? Who paid the costs for Spiritual Mobilization, the Religion in American Life advertising campaign, the National Prayer Breakfast, or Honor America Day? The roster reads like a who's who of the Fortune 500, with names like oil executive Sid Richardson, James L. Kraft of Kraft Foods, J. C. Penney, Harvey Firestone, Conrad Hilton and J. W. Marriott of hotel fame, Charles E. Wilson of General Electric, Walt Disney, and Robert W. Boggs of Union Carbide.

These contributors could hardly be described as innocents. They expected a return on their investment, and, as Kruse demonstrates, they found no shortage of politicians willing to fly in the face of history to assert that the United States is a Christian nation, and no shortage of clergy willing to fly in the face of scripture to baptize free-market capitalism.

ADVERTISE  
HERE

To contact our advertising department, call (312) 263-7510 ext. 229 or e-mail: [advert@christiancentury.org](mailto:advert@christiancentury.org).

## Zionism and Judaism: A New Theory

By David Novak

Cambridge University Press, 274 pp., \$99.99

Michael Walzer, in *The Paradox of Liberation*, has written of the complex and vexed relationship between Judaism and contemporary Zionism. Now David Novak has weighed in on the same question but finds nothing vexing or complex about it. His book is a rigorous and coherent theological argument that will illumine those who pay attention to the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, as well as those who wish to probe the theological and ideological underpinnings of the state of Israel.

The heart of that theology is the claim of election, which Novak traces in four dimensions, all of them unilateral on God's part and without explanation. Novak writes that God's choices are "infinitely more radical than our own." These four

aspects of God's electing action are simply given on which his entire argument rests.

First, God chose to create the universe as God's possession. The universe is always to stand before God. Second, God chose to create human persons who are God's "partners in their own making." Human persons are addressed by and answerable to God. Third, God chose Israel/the Jewish people as "the optimal community for the God-human relationship." Novak reiterates much that Joel Kaminsky has written on the election of Israel, which both authors take as an absolute given. These three claims are unexceptional in theological discourse; readers of my *Theology of the Old Testament* will recognize that I have treated these elective choices as "God's partners," a phrase that Novak also uses.

Novak's argument pivots on his fourth point: God chose the land of Israel as "the optimal earthly locus for

*Reviewed by Walter Brueggemann, author of Sabbath as Resistance (Westminster John Knox).*

## Collaborative Inquiry Teams

*A commitment to explore together and strengthen the life of North American Christian congregations.*



**Denise Thorpe, pastor & scholar, directs the Race, Church and Theological Practices team.**

"We share a common frustration with endless church and academic conversations about race that never seem to change the way we live together. The Collaborative Inquiry grant allows us to bring together academics and church practitioners in a deep spirit of collaboration, openness, honesty and trust."

Grants up to \$45,000 support teams of four to six pastors and professors exploring living questions the church faces today. Collaborative Inquiry proposals are due April 1.



LOUISVILLE  
INSTITUTE

Funded by Lilly Endowment  
based at Louisville Seminary

502-992-5432

Program guidelines and application available:  
[www.louisville-institute.org](http://www.louisville-institute.org)



Read **Samuel Wells** @  
**Faith Matters**



**“By committing themselves to meet regularly together, Christians become aware of those who are not gathering together—those who are absent. This is how the community develops the practice of pastoral care and evangelism, the skill of memory for those missing, the virtue of love for the lost, and the notion of the communion of saints.”**

*(from Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics)*



THE  
**Christian**  
CENTURY

the God-Israel relationship.” It is important for Novak that this fourth claim has the same normative status as the previous three. God’s choice of the land is elemental for Novak’s read of Judaism, and Zionism serves the chosenness of the land. He does not say that the state of Israel is chosen, but that the state of Israel is a compelling embodiment of the choice of the land, so allegiance to the state of Israel is an inescapable expression of God’s choice of the land.

Novak adds a fifth choice: “the political choice of the Jewish people . . . to choose the kind of polity . . . they judge to be the best means of keeping the divine commandment to settle the land of Israel as the earthly center of the covenant between God and the people Israel.” Novak is clear about the priority of land over the state: “The state of Israel is for the sake of the people Israel in the land of Israel; the people Israel in the land of Israel is not for the sake of the state of Israel.”

Inescapably Novak must come to the question of how the state of Israel will be both “Jewish and democratic.” The Jewish part is not difficult. The state of Israel is destined to be Jewish because it occupies the land that is nonnegotiable Jewish. The democratic part of the equation is more difficult, and Novak gives great attention to it. His argument is not informed by issues of contemporary constitutionalism or any other practical consideration. It is an argument from the tradition about how Jews can host non-Jews in their own land.

Novak eschews a “French approach to democracy” that appeals to “natural rights” and appeals instead to the Noahide commandments. He makes much of the command that Jews must “acquire and settle the land,” so non-Jews have the status of “resident aliens” whose civil rights are to be guaranteed. Such gentiles must adhere to the Noahide commandments, the principle ones of which concern idolatry, murder, and sexual license. In the end, however, Novak must define *democracy* in a doubtful way because he concludes that non-Jews cannot have full political autonomy because they do not have full legal autonomy under the laws of the Torah. At best, non-Jews are to be granted hospitality, but completely on the terms of full and uncontested Jewish authority. Novak allows that a democracy must depend on

the rule of the majority, but he does not comment on the prospect that Jews may eventually not have a majority in the land.

In the end the book is a disappointment. Its subtitle proposes a new theory, but it seems rather to be a careful and thoughtful reiteration of long-held Jewish insistence. By now we have a right to expect that in crucial conversation every triumphalist tradition (Christian, Jewish, Muslim, capitalist, or whatever) should entertain a modicum of self-critical awareness and an acknowledgment that very particular triumphalism has been deeply problematized. Novak evidences no such awareness. The careful argument eventuates in a conclusion that is all too familiar.

Consideration of the “Jewish and democratic” must finally come to the Palestinian question. Novak’s terse comment is this:

Now there might be very good realpolitik type reasons why the Jewish state cannot recognize the legitimacy of a non-Jewish (Palestinian) state at the

present time. After all, it does not seem that the Palestinians are ready now to recognize that their autonomy could only come from it being conceded to them by the Jewish state already in full control of the land of Israel. And it does not seem that the Palestinians are now ready to even recognize the political legitimacy of the Jewish state of Israel.

Novak adds a wistful comment that the possibility of Palestinian status as “resident aliens” by the grant of Israel seems to have no practical application, but it “might have practical application in the as yet unpredictable future.” . . . It is hard for many Jews to contemplate what should be the presence of non-Jews in the land of Israel or as citizens of the state of Israel.”

I judge that it is even harder for many Palestinians to entertain the argument he advances. Such hope might be a way to keep the future open; or it might be a way to avoid facing the undoing of every absolutism, even the ones that have established theological genealogy.



## Lenten Devotional

Pittsburgh Theological Seminary invites you to follow our daily Lenten Devotional. Visit [www.pts.edu/devotional](http://www.pts.edu/devotional) to learn more.

- Read online or print and share.
- Receive daily e-mails.
- Follow along on Facebook, Twitter, and Google+.
- Download our free Android or Apple app.
- Request your printed copy.



**New this year:**  
Download an e-book of faculty sermons.  
Watch live interviews exploring Lenten themes throughout the season.

**PITTSBURGH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY** [www.pts.edu](http://www.pts.edu)

# HUNGER KEEPS UP ON CURRENT EVENTS, TOO.

1 IN 6 AMERICANS  
STRUGGLES WITH HUNGER.

TOGETHER  
WE'RE

FEEDING  
AMERICA

FeedingAmerica.org

## Godless Democrats and Pious Republicans? Party Activists, Party Capture, and the "God Gap"

By Ryan L. Claassen

Cambridge University Press, 208 pp.,  
\$29.99 paperback

Over the past two decades the "God gap" has been a popular trope among political journalists. Republicans are churchgoers; Democrats are secular. For the academically inclined, this division reproduces the American culture wars made famous by sociologist James Davison Hunter. And as Ryan Claassen notes in this sensible book, political and academic combatants alike often resort to conspiracy theories to explain the gap: Democrats claim that the Christian right mobilized hordes of religious extremists, capturing the GOP and reconfiguring its agenda to match their own regressive social ideas. Republicans reply that the Democratic Party is in the thrall of secularists conducting a war on religion, hell-bent on eliminating the influence of faith in the public square.

Ryan Claassen wants to root out this mythology of the God gap and debunk conspiratorial explanations of its origins. He juxtaposes two theories about the causes of partisan religious divisions. The group mobilization perspective, dominant in political science, stresses the leadership of activists in party transformation. In this view, the Christian right mobilized an enormous body of new activists, pulling the GOP to the right and attracting religious voters with traditionalist postures on abortion, gay rights, and other culture war issues. This invasion triggered a countermovement of secular (and often, secularist) activists into the Democratic Party, who attracted their own like-minded voters, creating the gap between faithful Republicans and faithless Democrats.

Claassen rejects this account for both empirical and normative reasons. First, it ignores the numerous party faithful who do not fit the portrait, such as religious Democrats and secular Republicans. Even worse, belief in the God gap and its origins in one-sided mobilizations might actually

become a self-fulfilling prophecy, leading Americans to sort themselves politically in the very way the image suggests. As a more helpful alternative, Claassen offers a representation-based approach, arguing that party activists emerge from, rather than create, each party's electoral base. The appropriate question is: Do party activists accurately reflect voting constituencies? If they do, the result accords with democratic theory—and belies the claims of conspiracy theorists.

Claassen tests the two approaches, using the American National Election Studies from 1960 to 2008. He classifies anyone who performs at least two political acts during an election as an activist. If the representation theory is correct, the shifting distribution of party activists over that period should reflect changing demographics, as well as turnout rates and partisan loyalty. If the mobilization approach is correct, disproportionate rates of activism, indicative of group mobilization, should account for the distribution, but only if such activism cannot be explained by social changes such as upward mobility.

Claassen finds convincing support for the representation-based approach, rather than the group mobilization perspective. Starting with the anchor groups for the supposed God gap, he shows that evangelical gains in the GOP stem from rising numbers of evangelicals in the electorate, increased voting rates, and greater loyalty to the GOP—not from surges in activism. Secular activists are more numerous among Democrats for identical reasons: more secular voters, higher turnout rates, and growing Democratic loyalty. Again, there is no evidence for disproportionate mobilization.

Mainline Protestant activism has been decimated in both parties because of declining numbers in general and, in the GOP case, fading loyalty. Catholics have held their numbers but divide by ethnicity, with white Catholics infusing the GOP while declining among Democrats, a loss that is offset somewhat by new Hispanic entrants. For African-American Protestants, numbers have changed little,

---

*Reviewed by James L. Guth, professor of political science at Furman University, Greenville, South Carolina.*

turnout has increased modestly, and loyalty remains strongly Democratic. Here mobilization does play a significant role, as activists proliferated during Barack Obama's 2008 candidacy.

All this analysis is readable, methodologically sophisticated, and usually convincing. The book would benefit, however, from a little more transparency about its limits. Not only does the small activist population of the ANES preclude analysis of smaller but politically active traditions, such as Judaism and Mormonism, the ANES also lacks items on religious beliefs.

This deficiency proves especially problematic when Claassen attacks Hunter's argument that religious traditionalism underlies the God gap. Claassen has to rely on church attendance, a behavioral measure, to assess traditionalism, a theological concept. Although he finds that membership in specific traditions (not religious traditionalism) still structures partisan divisions, other studies have shown that direct religious belief items do a much better job of distinguishing partisans than church attendance does—which suggests caution about his conclusion.

The book would also benefit from deeper engagement with other studies. Although Claassen's treatment of other scholars is eminently fair, he does not

always fully grapple with their work. Surveys of state and national party delegates, political contributors, and local party workers have often provided strong evidence for the group mobilization perspective, at least in some places and in some election years. To cite just two examples, the disproportionate number of secular delegates at the 1972 Democratic convention and Christian conservatives at the 1988 GOP conclave suggest more "capture" than Claassen admits. Careful comparison of studies with different targets, with varying methodologies, and from different years might provide additional insights into the validity of the two approaches he evaluates.

It is unclear to me why the religious gap between Republican and Democratic activists—and it does exist—is less troubling if it accurately represents voters rather than targeted mobilizations. If religious polarization among activists and voters is undesirable, it is undesirable regardless of its origins.

These criticisms do not minimize the significant contributions of Claassen's fine work, which is full of small and large insights on the current state of American religious politics. If Claassen's analysis often strains unduly toward normatively satisfying results, sympathetic readers can at least identify with his motive and learn from his efforts.

## MISSING AN ISSUE?

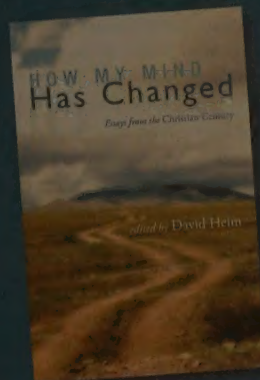


Contact CHRISTIAN CENTURY subscription services for back issues.

Call (800) 208-4097 or go to our website: [christiancentury.org](http://christiancentury.org).

## HOW MY MIND HAS CHANGED

Essays from  
the *Christian  
Century*



**Thirteen prominent  
Christian theologians  
speak of their  
journeys of faith  
and of the questions  
that have shaped  
their writing and  
scholarship.**

"This illuminating volume, the most theologically diverse in the series, is a compelling and worthy successor to the five that preceded it."

—Gary Dorrien, Union Theological Seminary

"This collection gathers together many of the world's most insightful and engaging thinkers, and the result is a delightful intellectual feast."

—L. Gregory Jones, Duke Divinity School



**CASCADE Books**

An Imprint of WIPF and STOCK Publishers

Web price: \$12.80

[wipfandstock.com/cascade\\_books](http://wipfandstock.com/cascade_books)

(541) 344-1528

## Out of sync

Unlike any other television series I've watched, *Rectify* (SundanceTV) moves slowly and carefully and is as much about a person's inner life as it is about external circumstances. Its exploration of moral and spiritual landscapes suggests new and unexpected directions for television.

In the first season, Daniel Holden (Aden Young) is released from Georgia's death row after serving 19 years for the rape and murder of his high school girlfriend, Hannah. New DNA evidence has vacated his sentence, but it has not fully exonerated him. He returns to his hometown and to the people who were devastated by the murder and his conviction. Although questions of guilt hover in the background, the show is not about whether Daniel committed the crime, and by the end of the third season (a fourth and final season begins later this year), it's not clear that viewers will ever know what happened to Hannah. Instead the show's central question is: What in this complex community—and in Daniel himself—can be made right?

Blinking into the sun on the day of his release, Daniel looks more like a cornered animal than a freed soul. He spends most of the first season staring out windows, trapped between memories of prison (which are shown in flashback) and his sudden freedom.

Daniel is out of sync with the world after 19 years. He disappeared into

prison before cell phones, before the Internet explosion, and before the recession hit his hometown hard. Even his speech patterns—deliberate and uncertain—seem old-fashioned. By most measures, he has not grown up. He's never held a job, owned a piece of property, or sustained an adult relationship.

But if we measure development by moral wisdom and self-knowledge, he is the most grown-up person in the series. He quotes Aquinas and Derrida and dispenses existential wisdom to his evangelical sister-in-law without sounding preachy or condescending. He delights in the mundane and revives our appreciation of an early morning donut run or the taste of a panini. He moves through the small town of Paulie, Georgia, as if he's a spirit from another time, unsettling everyone he meets, and unable to settle himself.

If Daniel is exceptionally attuned to the notes of inner life, he is tone deaf to the harmonies of community. As he says midway through the first season, the sheer possibilities for human relationships—who might know whom or say what or even just show up—boggle his mind after having lived two decades in isolation under the threat of death. Daniel craves community, but its complexities overwhelm him.

His return widens cracks that have been forming for years in the lives of his family and friends, Hannah's family, and the rest of the small town. His

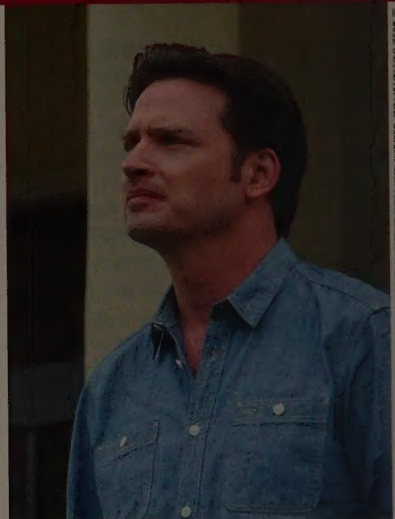
**FREED OR CORNERED?** Released from prison, Daniel Holden (Aden Young) becomes a philosophical observer of his small town in Georgia.

reappearance tests marriages, ruins friendships, and derails careers. The show spares no one—all are subjected to the same penetrating gaze; there are no heroes or villains.

Critics have compared the series to Flannery O'Connor's fiction because of its southern setting and its moral tone. But *Rectify* has one advantage over O'Connor: time. The show moves at a glacial pace—the entire first season covers six days and the first three seasons cover only a few months. A glance or gesture can reflect decades of resentment, confusion, and love, and whole scenes pass with only a few words of dialogue.

Like O'Connor's fiction, *Rectify*'s slow burn reveals the viewer as well as the characters in the story. At several points, I felt physically uncomfortable. I wanted some relief from the piercing gaze that seemed to reach through the heart of the characters into my own heart. This might not sound like a recommendation, but it is. *Rectify* has the potential for revealing and nurturing our spiritual and moral lives.

*The author is Kathryn Reklis, who teaches theology at Fordham University and is codirector of the Institute for Art, Religion and Social Justice.*



© 2015 SUNDANCE CHANNEL. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

# CHURCH in the MAKING

by Carol Howard Merritt

## Harvest in due time

I'm on an Innovative Ministry Percolator (IMP) conference call, looking at the profiles of several church planters on my computer screen and talking with them about the amazing things their communities have accomplished. They're also talking about their concerns.

IMP is a network of church planters who want to change the way we all think about and fund new ministries. Its members come from different denominations, and most of the worshipping communities were started with denominational grants. But the grants often last only three years, and it takes eight to ten years to plant a church that can support a minister. On the phone, one pastor explains how a funding source for a new worshipping community unexpectedly dried up. Another pastor confides to me later. "They wanted us to do this. They *begged* us to do this. Now they're turning their backs on us."

These pastors need a robust support system. Their churches often minister with people who are younger, differently abled, immigrant, or homeless, and their members may not have the resources of an established congregation. IMP wants the greater church to begin thinking of church planters as missionaries, with IMP acting as a mission agency to provide a network of support, tell stories, and raise money.

"We're not making disciples

in the same way. This is slow work. It's going to take a while," said Jeff Richards, founding pastor of WordHouse in Sacramento.

I helped start IMP when the realities of beginning a new community became personal. About five years ago, my husband, Brian Merritt, and I were pacing on the back porch of our house in the D.C. area: Brian wanted to start a church, and we were looking over our list of pros and cons. He had gone through our denomination's discernment process and found that he was well suited for the job. He had possible funding for three years in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

On the pro list, the move would let me focus on freelancing as a writer and speaker, and our cost of living would decrease in Tennessee. My research indicated that our denominations needed to start new ministries, so we would be able to practice what I preached.

On the con list, I wrote "no stability." There was no pastoral position open for me, so we would be giving up a steady income after 15 years in the ministry. Brian looked at me, took a deep breath, and said, "With a grant, we have stability for three years. Not many people in our profession have secure positions for that long."

I thought about that. We entered the ministry at the new millennium. Although we've

had wonderful job opportunities, most of our congregations have struggled through decline and an economic crisis. We have friends who accepted calls to small churches only to find out that they'd been called to close those congregations. Even those in stable positions have felt the clinking of "silver handcuffs," meaning they couldn't move even when things became unbearable for them, because there were so few positions at the same professional and income level.

We decided that even with the uncertainties, the pros outweighed the cons. We moved to Chattanooga.

Each month IMP reminds me that we're not alone in this work. We hear stories about grants that can be renewed but depend on a particular committee, and about how the vision of the committee changes as its members come and go. When they make decisions, these people are affecting the future of churches they've never been to and the lives of pastors they've never met. I can point to many faithful people who took great risks, moved their families, and sacrificed their savings, and then just as they gained momentum with new church communities, they were turned down for a grant needed to move forward.

I often hear about the

need for new church plants to be sustainable, and that is a goal of most new communities. But have denominations set up a model that is sustainable for pastors? Or do we burn out innovative leaders who are doing the job that denominations most need done?

When churches send missionaries overseas, they understand the missionaries' need to be supported for the long term. The missionaries plant churches and provide stories of their work. Could church planters in the United States amplify our stories if we work together? Could we provide accountability, support, and resources?

Members of the IMP have a good time together, laughing about frustrations and finding hope in difficult ministry settings. These pastors often have to defend their worshipping communities because they may not look like established congregations. They have developed different models of ministry, many of them key to the vitality of the church in a new time. They also know how to find and implement new models of support.

In their work they're leaning on the example of Paul, who started all of this. Perhaps all of us—pastors and congregations, established or newly planted—just need to remember our history.

Carol Howard Merritt is the author of *Tribal Church and cohost of God Complex Radio*.

*ENGAGING ORTHODOXY:*  
INAUGURAL SPEAKER'S SERIES



# The Unchanging Gospel in an Ever-Changing Culture

**Saturday, March 5, 2016**

10:00 am–Noon and 1:00–3:00 pm

In his inaugural lecture, **Metropolitan Kallistos Ware** will present an Eastern Orthodox understanding of the Gospel, and offer practical guidance on how local churches may keep it clear and central for each generation.

Respondents will be:

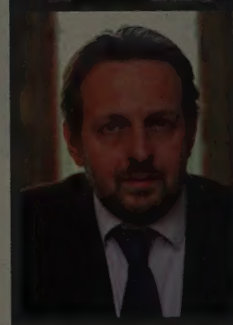
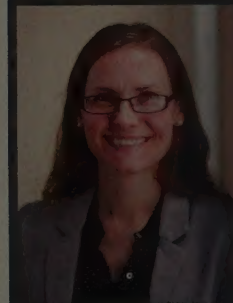
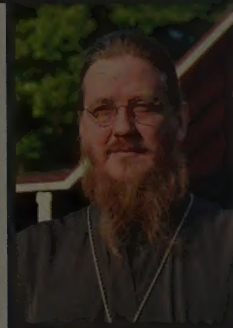
**Father John Behr**, Dean, St. Vladimir's Orthodox Seminary;

**Dr. Hauna Ondrey**, Teaching Fellow in Church History, North Park Seminary;

**Dr. Marcus Plested**, Associate Professor of Theology, Marquette University.

Session will be moderated by Bradley Nassif, Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies, North Park University.

Orthodoxy is on the cusp of a major theological renaissance in the 21st century. This annual series will help establish Orthodox theology as a vital religious force in American life and thought.



---

North Park University (Anderson Chapel), 3225 W. Foster Ave, Chicago, IL 60625  
[www.northpark.edu/orthodox](http://www.northpark.edu/orthodox). Call (773) 244-6213 for additional information. *Free to the Public.*